

**BORDER AWARENESS ENCOUNTERS**

**MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION AND ACCOMPANIMENT  
AT THE U.S. – MEXICO BORDER**

by

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Thesis-Project Director



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## Abstract

This thesis-project addresses the phenomenon of global migration as it is experienced at the U.S.-Mexico border, and specifically, in the sister communities of El Paso, Texas and Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. The experience of **Border Awareness Encounters** brings participants from churches and universities into contact with migrants and border organizations, through a praxis of intercultural encounter, mutual solidarity, and border hospitality to migrants based on Pope Francis' message "to welcome, protect, promote, and integrate migrants and refugees."

This thesis-project argues that **migrants and refugees are agents of conscientization, evangelization, and transformation**, and as such are key to transforming the Church into a more pastoral and prophetic witness to the Gospel.

Based on conversations with migrants and border organizations, and narratives shared by participants in week-long Border Awareness Encounters, this thesis-project will investigate how intercultural encounters help people see migrants and their families in the fullness of their human dignity as agents of conscientization, evangelization, and transformation, and how these intercultural encounters have impacted the participants of border awareness experiences, often leading to direct service, mutual accompaniment, advocacy and public witness on behalf of immigrants in communities, parishes, and dioceses when they return home.

## **1. Introduction: Genesis and Context of the Project**

Thesis Statement and Purpose of the Study

The Dramatic Reality of the U.S. – Mexico Border

The Genesis of a Border Pedagogy: Border Awareness Encounters

Broader Ministerial Import of the Study

Achievable Outcomes and Limitations of the Study

### **1.1 Thesis Statement and Purpose of the Study**

This thesis-project was inspired by my years working for the Missionary Society of St. Columban as director of the St. Columban Justice, Peace, and Ecology office in Washington DC (2013 – 2020), and director of the Columban Mission Center in El Paso, Texas (2021 – 2022).<sup>1</sup> My hope is that this thesis-project might contribute to a deeper understanding of what a ministry of reconciliation and mutual accompaniment with migrants and refugees actually entails, based on Gospel values and a pedagogy of “intercultural encounter,” “mutual accompaniment,” “mutual solidarity,” and “border hospitality,”<sup>2</sup> and a commitment to “welcome, protect, promote, and integrate” migrants, refugees and immigrants into our home communities.

My thesis-project addresses the phenomenon of global migration<sup>3</sup> as it is experienced at the U.S.-Mexico border, and specifically, in the sister communities of El

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<sup>1</sup> The Missionary Society of St. Columban has been engaged in pastoral ministry with migrants at the U.S. – Mexico border for more than 25 years through the Columban Mission Center in El Paso, TX and Corpus Christi parish in Anapra, Ciudad Juarez.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this thesis-project, we emphasize the mutuality of encounter, accompaniment, solidarity, and hospitality.

<sup>3</sup> Gioacchino Campese, “The Irruption of Migrants: Theology of Migration in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.” *Theological Studies*, March 2012, Vol. 73, No. 1.

Paso, Texas and Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. The experience of **Border Awareness Encounters** brings participants from churches and universities into contact with migrants and border organizations, through a praxis of intercultural encounter, mutual solidarity, and border hospitality to migrants based on Pope Francis' message "to welcome, protect, promote, and integrate migrants and refugees."<sup>4</sup>

The experience of Border Awareness Encounters employs what is commonly known as the Pastoral Circle (or Pastoral Spiral), based on a circular process of See – Judge – Act<sup>5</sup>, and more recently, adding the dimension of Celebration so essential to the sacramental dimension of both Catholic liturgy and Indigenous cultures.

This thesis-project argues that **migrants and refugees are agents of conscientization,<sup>6</sup> evangelization,<sup>7</sup> and transformation,<sup>8</sup>** and as such are key to

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<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis, "Message for the 104<sup>th</sup> World Day of Migrants and Refugees," January 14, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> See-Judge-Act is a pastoral theological method to assist groups responding to social issues, developed by Joe Holland & Peter Henriot, S.J. in their booklet *Social Analysis*, published by the Center of Concern in 1980. It has roots in the 'see, judge, act' method of Cardinal Joseph Cardijn which Pope John XXIII incorporated into Catholic social teaching in 1961. See [https://maryknollogc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/pastoral\\_circle\\_see\\_judge\\_act\\_2pager.pdf](https://maryknollogc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/pastoral_circle_see_judge_act_2pager.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> *Conscientization* is a concept developed by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire in the 1960s, and popularized in his 1970 book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018). *Conscientization* refers to "the process of developing a critical consciousness of the social and political forces that shape our lives, and developing the critical thinking skills to challenge injustice and create change. This is not simply an intellectual process, or a moment of enlightenment, but one that presupposes an ongoing commitment to action. Nor is it an individual process; we discover and seek to change reality through our collective activity." See <https://freire.org/concepts-used-by-paulo-freire>

<sup>7</sup> *Evangelization* refers to "the effort to proclaim the Gospel to the people of today (1) ... The Church ... has the duty to proclaim the liberation of millions of human beings, many of whom are her own children, the duty of assisting the birth of this liberation, of giving witness to it, of ensuring that it is complete. This is not foreign to evangelization (30). See Pope Paul VI's Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, [https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_exh\\_19751208\\_evangelii-nuntiandi.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html)

<sup>8</sup> *Transformation* refers to "a true commitment to social change, require[ing] a profound shift in perspective. It's about letting go of old ways of thinking and embracing a new understanding of the world. This is not a one-time event, but an ongoing process. See <https://freire.org/concepts-used-by-paulo-freire>

transforming the Church into a more pastoral and prophetic witness to the Gospel. By “conscientization” I mean the ways in which people and communities develop a critical understanding of their social reality through reflection and action. By “evangelization” I mean the ways in which people and communities develop a critical understanding of their faith lived out in a social context and illuminated by the Good News of the Gospel. By “transformation” I mean the ways in which people and communities develop a critical understanding of faith in action, and how the Gospel calls us to witness in both word and deed.

I explore (1) how migrants and refugees are agents of conscientization, evangelization, and transformation, and (2) what impact they have on both border organizations, religious congregations and churches supporting migrants at the border, as well as on border awareness participants involved in ministry to migrants in their home communities.

Based on conversations with migrants and border organizations, and narratives shared by participants in week-long Border Awareness Encounters, this thesis-project will investigate how intercultural encounters help people see migrants and their families in the fullness of their human dignity as agents of conscientization, evangelization, and transformation, and how these intercultural encounters have impacted the participants of border awareness experiences, often leading to direct service, mutual accompaniment, advocacy and public witness on behalf of immigrants in communities, parishes, and dioceses when they return home.

Theologian Robert Schreiter's work on reconciliation,<sup>9</sup> will illuminate our understanding of what conscientization, evangelization, and transformation mean in the context of intercultural encounters with migrants at the U.S. – Mexico border, and how migrants and refugees themselves are agents of conscientization, evangelization, and transformation.

Using Schreiter's model of reconciliation,<sup>10</sup> we will argue that Border Awareness Encounters provide a framework, a process, and a pedagogy that demonstrate the validity of his work, based on his five theological premises:

(1) "*reconciliation is the work of God, who initiates and completes in us reconciliation through Christ*" by means of intercultural encounter, mutual solidarity, and welcome to migrants and refugees;

(2) "*reconciliation is more a spirituality than a strategy,*" and happens through "spiritual practices that create space for truth, for justice, for healing, and for new

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<sup>9</sup> Robert J. Schreiter, C.P.P.S. "A Practical Theology of Healing, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation." In *Peacebuilding: Catholic Theology, Ethics, and Praxis*, ed. Robert J. Schreiter, R. Scott Appleby, and Gerard F. Powers, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010).

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\_\_\_\_\_. *Reconciliation: Mission & Ministry in a Changing Social Order* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., *The Ministry of Reconciliation* (1998), 13-19. See also Schreiter's description in his later essays, "Migrants and the Ministry of Reconciliation," in *A Promised Land* (2008), 108-111; and Schreiter, "A Practical Theology of Healing, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation," in *Peacebuilding: Catholic Theology, Ethics, and Praxis* (2010), 368-375.

possibilities” including intercultural encounters made possible through Border Awareness Encounters and border hospitality;

(3) “*the experience of reconciliation makes of both victim and wrongdoer a new creation,*” beginning with the victim (in this context, the migrant), such that a partial but real experience of “the new creation” and “the beloved community”<sup>11</sup> is made possible by encounters with migrants and refugees;

(4) “*the process of reconciliation that creates the new humanity is to be found in the story of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ,*” which serves as a scriptural analogue to the actual experience of migrants, refugees, and participants in Border Awareness Encounters; and

(5) while “*the process of reconciliation will be fulfilled only with the complete consummation of the world by God in Christ,*” Border Awareness Encounters and border hospitality anticipate a culture of encounter, mutual solidarity, and practices that welcome, protect, promote, and integrate migrants and refugees into both border and local communities across the United States.

In a similar fashion, we will touch on the work of theologian David Hollenbach on accompaniment based on intercultural encounters with migrants and refugees. We will explore two faith-based projects initiated in 2026, and the ways immigrants and refugees have conscientized, evangelized, and transformed the practice of Catholics and other faith

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<sup>11</sup> “The beloved community” is a term that was first coined in the early days of the 20th Century by the philosopher-theologian Josiah Royce, who founded the Fellowship of Reconciliation. However, it was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., also a member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, who popularized the term and invested it with a deeper meaning which has captured the imagination of people of goodwill all over the world. See <https://thekingcenter.org/about-tkc/the-king-philosophy/>

traditions in communities, parishes, and dioceses across the nation to provide direct services, mutual accompaniment, advocacy and public witness on behalf of immigrant families and communities.

The Hope Border Institute, based in El Paso, TX, together with the Center for Migration Studies in New York, have launched the Catholic Immigrant Prophetic Action Project (IMMpact) “to assist the Catholic Church in the United States in organizing a robust response on behalf of migrants and refugees in the country who are living in fear of deportation.”<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Jesuit Refugee Services USA, together with other Catholic institutions and religious communities, launched the Season of Faithful Witness, “a national Catholic movement calling individuals, parishes, and communities to live their faith through visible, collective, public witness” on behalf of justice for immigrants and other social justice concerns.<sup>13</sup>

## **1.2 The Dramatic Reality at the U.S.-Mexico Border**

Migration is a global phenomenon (According to the Migration Policy Institute, there were 304 million migrants, or 3.7 percent of the world’s population, in 2024).<sup>14</sup> For many decades now – until January 2025, when the second Trump administration effectively sealed our southern border – the U.S.-Mexico border has been a place of dramatic **intercultural encounter**—set in the context of an exponential increase in global migration. The drama of migration and forced displacement, and the dangers faced on the journey, is further aggravated by dire poverty and famine, political and social

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.ncronline.org/news/new-partnership-aims-support-churchs-ministry-migrants-refugees>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.catholicsincommunion.org/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/top-statistics-global-migration-migrants-2025>

violence, and degradation of the environment – with systemic roots – in the places they are leaving behind.

The phenomenon of global migration can only be understood by examining different factors, including the **root causes** of why people migrate, as well as the difficulties and treacherous nature of the migrant journey, and the challenges they face in entering the United States to pursue their asylum claims. In addition, when we speak of root causes, we must look at a global extractive economy that benefits corporations over people and the environment, as well as U.S. trade and investment policies, and U.S. support for authoritarian governments that favor such policies.

For decades, a migrant journey ended or continued at the U.S.-Mexico border, depending on whether their quest to claim asylum, in a highly charged and constantly changing political environment in the United States, was successful or was denied, resulting in the latter case to deportation back to the countries they had fled only weeks, months, or sometimes years before. Increasingly, claims for asylum are not even heard, as both the Biden and Trump administrations have created policies that make it difficult or impossible to file a claim by effectively closing the border and forcing migrants to remain in Mexico. Today, very few migrants can enter the United States to pursue an asylum claim.

All these factors combine to inform the heart-rending personal stories that migrants tell – stories of the life or death situations they left behind in their home countries; stories of the dangers of the migrant journey; and stories of the challenges they face at the U.S. – Mexico border – to create narratives that are powerful means of conscientization, evangelization, and transformation of those privileged to hear them.

The decades long failure of successive Republican and Democratic administrations and the U.S. Congress to enact **comprehensive immigration reform**<sup>15</sup> has politicized – and indeed demonized – the phenomenon of immigration and the border, turning migrants into scapegoats, and border organizations who serve migrants into prime targets of harassment and persecution by those who espouse racist, ultranationalist, and anti-migrant agendas. This is especially the case with the second Trump administration.

The media rhetoric during the 2024 presidential campaign about migrant violence in Aurora, Colorado, Springfield, Ohio, and the murder of Laken Riley in Athens, Georgia are examples of demonizing immigrants and criminalizing migration based on isolated incidents of violence committed by a minority of immigrants in our country. Indeed, the incidents of violence committed by immigrants is below the national average of violence committed by U.S. citizens.<sup>16</sup>

The polarization of people in our country around migration and the border has resulted not only in the demonization of migrants, but decisions by all three branches of the government to draw back from protecting and upholding the rights of migrants and promoting the values of our nation to welcome and protect the stranger. This is the context for our thesis-project, and focuses on the concluding years of the Biden administration and the beginning years of the second Trump administration.

Under the Biden administration, the Federal Government imposed a suspension of normal asylum processing at the U.S. – Mexico border when the seven-day average of

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<sup>15</sup> The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 legalized some 2.7 million undocumented immigrants who entered the United States before 1982.

<sup>16</sup> [https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/mpi-explainer-immigration-crime-2024\\_final.pdf](https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/mpi-explainer-immigration-crime-2024_final.pdf)

encounters with migrants by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) reached 2,500 at the El Paso – Ciudad Juarez border: “This executive action significantly limit[ed] the chances of *bona fide* asylum seekers to present their protection claims and increase[ed] the chances of forced removal.”<sup>17</sup>

These actions by the Federal Government were compounded by actions taken by the State of Texas under “an immigration enforcement operation, known as Operation Lone Star, which first began in March 2021.”<sup>18</sup> Under that program, the Attorney General of Texas, Ken Paxton, falsely accused Annunciation House – a shelter in El Paso, Texas that has provided hospitality to five hundred thousand migrants over the past forty or more years<sup>19</sup> – of trafficking migrants, and sought to close it down.

In response, on February 22, 2024, the Catholic bishop of El Paso, Texas, the Reverend Mark J. Seitz, made the following statement of unqualified support for Annunciation House and its important mission:

“Today we find ourselves in an impossible position, hemmed in on all sides. On the one hand, we are challenged by serious federal neglect to provide a safe, orderly, and human response to migration at our southern border. On the other hand, we are now witnessing an escalating campaign of intimidation, fear, and dehumanization in the State of Texas, one characterized by barbed wire, harsh

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<sup>17</sup> Hope Border Institute, Border Observatory 2024, *Pain as Strategy: The Violence of U.S.-Mexico Immigration Enforcement and Texas’ Operation Lone Star against People on the Move in El Paso – Ciudad Juarez*, 1.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Author’s conversation with Mary Fontana, author of a forthcoming book documenting the history of Annunciation House: *Strangers in the Province of Joy*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2026).

new laws penalizing the act of seeking safety at our border, and the targeting of those who would offer aid as a response of faith....

“Let me be clear. For the church’s part, we will endeavor to work with all in pursuit of the common good of our city and nation. We will vigorously defend the freedom of people of faith and goodwill to put deeply held religious convictions into practice. We will not be intimidated in our work to serve Jesus Christ in our sisters and brothers fleeing danger and seeking to keep their families together. We will stand in solidarity with our community’s aid workers and volunteers, with our community non-profits assisting migrants, as well as with all those in the borderlands and throughout our state living under the weight of inhumane immigration policies.”<sup>20</sup>

The current Trump administration has taken these restrictive policies to new and draconian heights, effectively shutting down the U.S. asylum system and undertaking a policy of mass deportation of immigrants previously protected under provisions of the Biden administration. In his Lenten 2026 pastoral letter, Bishop Seitz strongly rejected the Trump administration’s policy of mass detention and mass deportation of immigrants as “a grave moral evil”:

“I am blessed with many friendships with our local law enforcement and immigration enforcement agents. Their work to keep our community safe is vital. But the death of those in immigration detention is unacceptable. An unjust immigration system that leads to deadly outcomes is destructive of our shared humanity. No one has to obey an immoral order. I implore all involved to carefully discern the moral requirements of

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.elpasodiocese.org/statement-in-support-of-annunciation-house.html>.

the Gospel at this moment with integrity and honesty. When we take off our masks and encounter each other as neighbors, we can reclaim our common dignity. I promise the pastoral support of our priests, chaplains and myself as you navigate the demands of conscience with sincerity. You are also in my prayers.

“Mass deportation will not make our communities safer. They separate families, divide neighbors and threaten our economic wellbeing. While we do need significant immigration reforms, it is an injustice to make families, children and the vulnerable pay the price of our inaction. Policies, laws and borders must always be at the service of human dignity, genuine community security, and human flourishing.

“For these reasons, I must make clear, the current national campaign of mass detention and deportation is a grave moral evil, one which must be opposed, with prayer, peaceful action and acts of solidarity with those affected. In these acts, we touch the wounds of Jesus Christ, and in this solidarity, we carry forward the hope of the Resurrection. God is on the side of justice, and as we journey towards Easter, we know that God is fashioning a new humanity that reflects God’s blessings for all people.”

### **1.3 The Genesis of a Border Pedagogy: Border Awareness Encounters**

My involvement with this project began in July 2021, when I was invited by the Missionary Society of St. Columban to take on additional responsibilities as director of the St. Columban Center for Justice, Peace, and Ecology in Washington DC, a position I had held for eight years. I was invited to become the new Director of the Columban Mission Center in El Paso, Texas, which had been closed for two years on account of the COVID pandemic.

Although I had regularly visited the Columban Mission Center and met with the Columban Border Ministry Team during my eight years as director of the Columban advocacy office in Washington DC, I came to the border as a person many generations removed from the immigration experience, and from the European world of colonizers and settlers, rather than the world of those colonized in the Americas, Africa, and Asia. I came also as an empathetic “outside listener”<sup>21</sup> to the borderlands, home to diverse peoples of Indigenous, Mestizo and Afro-descendant heritage, whose lands and cultures had been divided by the political and cultural boundaries imposed on them by colonizing powers.

My task was to help reopen the Columban Mission Center, which had been closed for two years because of the COVID pandemic, and to begin to rebuild the Border Awareness Encounter program which invited churches and universities to encounter the diverse cultural and historical reality of the borderlands, now living through an especially dramatic time post-COVID, due to the increased flow of migrants and their families seeking safe-haven and asylum in the United States.

For the previous ten years the Columban Mission Center had hosted more than one hundred week-long intercultural encounters bringing university students, parishioners, and church groups to the borderlands for an entire week. Such encounters often lead to a profound experience of conversion, challenging and inviting participants to change their perspectives, and to make new and fundamental decisions about their lives. In these encounters with migrants and border residents, physical barriers like bridges and walls

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<sup>21</sup> Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985 / 2015), 66-71.

divide and exclude people, determining not only who shall be allowed into the United States to pursue an asylum claim, but also who shall be denied entry, detained, and deported – decisions that sometimes determine who shall live and who shall die.

Over many years, a kind of border pedagogy has developed, based on these intercultural encounters between migrants, border organizations, religious communities, and border churches, and participants in Border Awareness Encounters. The role of the Columban Mission Center is to facilitate an encounter between migrants, border organizations, and participants in the Border Awareness Encounter program. Together, migrants, border residents, and those who have come to participate in these Border Awareness Encounters form part of a community of teachers and learners. These Border Awareness Encounters are a practice that involves intercultural encounter and mutual accompaniment, border hospitality and mutual solidarity, in a dynamic process illuminated by the pastoral circle (or pastoral spiral), whose components – See, Judge, Act, and Celebrate – aptly describe both the progress of the week, as well as the experience of each day.

A typical first day begins with an experience of borderland history and border culture.<sup>22</sup> The Santa Fe bridge, for example, is full of history, but you need a trained historian like David Romo to be able to make that history come alive.<sup>23</sup> There, a century ago, Mexicans who crossed the border to work in the U.S. were sprayed with

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<sup>22</sup> See <https://sites.tufts.edu/rcdkeywords/borderlands/> “Herbert Eugene Bolton coined the term Borderlands in his 1921 book, *The Spanish Borderlands*. His term became popularized by scholar Gloria Anzaldúa’s 1987, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Her book focuses specifically on her own experiences growing up along the Texas-U.S. Southwest / Mexican border. She prefaces Borderlands as generally existing physically, wherever two or more cultures meet, including across class, racial, gender, and national lines.”

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.texasobserver.org/author/david-romo/>

disinfectants and strip-searched, to be able to work for a pittance before returning home to Mexico each night. There, too, a century ago, Mexican women refused to undergo such a demeaning treatment and led a protest that effectively shut down the bridge. There, too, today, migrants and refugees from Latin America, and even Africa and Asia, face some of the same challenges and demeaning treatment as a century before.

The streets of El Paso, too, are full of borderland culture, a most significant example being the colorful murals that recount the stories of the borderlands, both in the past as well as today. We often program meetings with the Farmworker Center<sup>24</sup> and *La Mujer Obrera*,<sup>25</sup> where residents of Mexican ancestry continue to organize for justice in the fields and in the barrios, using popular education to build community, promote solidarity, and delve deep into their cultural roots and historical memory.

On day two we begin to go deeper, as participants ask questions: What is going on? Why is this happening? Participants meet with El Paso Diocesan Migrant and Refugee Services,<sup>26</sup> with Jesuit Refugee Services,<sup>27</sup> and with migrants who have recently been released from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention centers, and who now reside for a few days in church-affiliated shelters like Annunciation House<sup>28</sup> or Sacred Heart parish in Segundo Barrio.<sup>29</sup> In addition to setting up these encounters, as facilitators, we experience anew what the participants are experiencing for the first time. We accompany them as we encounter the border communities and migrants and join

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<sup>24</sup> <https://catholiccourier.com/articles/el-paso-project-helps-farmworkers-recover-dignity/>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.influencewatch.org/non-profit/centro-del-obrero-fronterizo-border-workers-center/>

<sup>26</sup> <https://estrelladelpaso.org/>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.jesuits.org/our-work/justice-and-ecology/migration-and-immigration/>

<sup>28</sup> <https://annunciationhouse.org/>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.sacredheartelpaso.org/>

them at meals, in travel between meetings, and for their morning and evening reflections. But we are not experts. We are a community of teachers and learners, asking questions, sharing reflections, and sowing seeds.

Day three is the heart of the week, as we cross the Santa Fe bridge from El Paso, Texas into Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, and there encounter the same borderland culture, but more harshly set in extreme poverty, police and cartel violence, vulnerability of migrants and their families from dozens of countries and cultures, and the border ministries who are accompanying and serving the people and the migrants in diverse ways. We visit Corpus Christi, a Columban parish in Anapra,<sup>30</sup> which is located near the border wall, in a community where most residents work in the assembly plants or *maquilas* for a pittance and work long hours. There the memory of police and cartel violence, and feminicides is real. We meet the Sisters of Charity working with children with disabilities, and volunteers from local parishes offering a noon meal at the Cathedral in downtown Juarez to migrants waiting to cross the border into the United States. There, too, we visit the border wall and continue to be challenged, to ask questions, to express gratitude, to be transformed.

Day four, the final day, brings home the challenges of the week's encounters. We meet with the Border Patrol, tasked with detaining migrants and enforcing borders between ports of entry. The Border Patrol – together with Customs and Border Protection (CBP), who are tasked with controlling border entry on the bridges, and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), who are tasked with detaining immigrants – form the first

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<sup>30</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/Parroquia.Corpus.Christi.Anapra/about>

responders at the border to allow or deny entry to migrants and refugees at the border. Often, when we visit the migrant shelters, we meet migrants recently released from detention and we hear their stories first-hand. This day provides a dramatic picture of the borderland reality, as participants struggle to understand the reality behind the stories they hear, to ask hard questions, and to see the consequences of decisions made thousands of miles away by political representatives in Washington D.C. that impact the lives of these migrants and borderland communities in life-and-death ways.

Before we close the week, we sometimes do a Migrant Way of the Cross,<sup>31</sup> climbing the El Paso side of Mount Cristo Rey, a hill that divides the border, to reflect on the fifteen stations from the perspective of the migrant reality, and the story of our faith: beginning with Abraham and Sarah's journey and the Exodus, to the Holy Family's flight into Egypt as sojourners, to the journey migrants make today in search of refuge. We then go to the border wall, this time from the El Paso side, where we sometimes can speak to migrants and their families living on the other side of the wall in Anapra, where we had been the day before. We meditate on the reality of forced displacement and migration, of separation and exclusion, of the tenets of our faith and hope, and offer a prayer.

That evening, we share a meal and have our final reflection, acknowledging how we have been changed, and what we can do, personally, or as a university or parish community, to put into practice Gospel values and the social teaching of the Church, and

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<sup>31</sup> See Franciscan Migrant Way of the Cross: <https://www.redfranciscana.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/ENG-Viacrucis-Migrante-2023.pdf>, and Ignatian Migrant Way of the Cross: <https://www.jesuitscentralsouthern.org/stories/the-stations-of-the-cross-with-migrants/>

respond to the invitation of Pope Francis, “to welcome, protect, promote, and integrate” migrants and refugees in our local communities.

#### **1.4 Broader Ministerial Import of the Study**

This project provides a case study of Border Awareness Encounters, a model of praxis-based learning, with an emphasis on intercultural encounter, mutual solidarity, and hospitality based on welcome, protection, promotion, and integration of migrants and refugees that may be helpful to other models of learning in both church and university settings.

It also provides a case study of social justice advocacy rooted in the experience of migrants and refugees (and the border organizations that serve them) as those who are directly impacted by U.S. asylum and border policies and who are therefore agents of conscientization, evangelization and transformation regarding those very policies.

This thesis-project, set in the context of border hospitality to migrants, will demonstrate the process employed in the Border Awareness Encounters of the Pastoral Circle – See, Judge, Act, Celebrate – and describe the following dynamics of such encounters:

(1) How migrants and their families *conscientize* members of the “host” society to the root causes of migration, including deep social and economic inequalities, political violence, and climate change. By “conscientization” we mean the ways in which people and communities develop a critical understanding of their social reality through reflection and action.

(2) How migrants and their families *evangelize* members of the “host” society by their deep experience of faith, and how they invite and challenge those who encounter

them to a deeper understanding of the Gospel and its call to justice and solidarity. By “evangelization” we mean the ways in which people and communities develop a critical understanding of their faith lived out in a social context and illuminated by the Good News of the Gospel.

(3) How migrants and their families invite Christians and others to a Gospel-centered conversion, and challenge us to *transform* our lives and our Church through intercultural encounter, mutual solidarity, and hospitality for migrants and refugees. By “transformation” we mean the ways in which people and communities develop a critical understanding of faith in action, and how the Gospel calls us to witness in both word and deed.

### **1.5 Achievable Outcomes and Limitations of the Study**

This study also has its necessary limitations, of which three of the most noteworthy include the following:

(1) This project is *geographically limited* to the experience of one border community – El Paso / Ciudad Juarez – along the U.S. – Mexico border. The phenomenon of global migration varies from country to country, and even along the U.S. – Mexico border.

(2) This project captures *a snapshot in time*, covering two periods in time: 2021 – 2024 (the years of the Biden administration), and 2025 – 2026 (the first two years of the second Trump administration). These two periods are marked by strong contrasts, depending both on the flow of migrants from different countries crossing the U.S. – Mexico border at the time, as well as U.S. asylum and border policies of each administration.

Under the Biden administration, immigration and border policies were deeply flawed, with large numbers of immigrants admitted into the United States as well as large numbers being denied entry and deported. Under the Trump administration, the border was effectively sealed, and immigration policies were defined by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids on immigrant communities, family separations, mass detention and mass deportation.

(3) This project focuses on *the experience of Border Awareness Encounters* facilitated by the Columban Mission Center and the Columban Border Ministry Team. Prior to the COVID pandemic of 2020, the Columban Mission Center hosted from twelve to fifteen Border Awareness Encounters a year before the Center was closed for two years on account of COVID.

In 2022, the Mission Center reopened and hosted six Border Awareness Encounters in the spring, and then only one or two in 2023, 2024, and 2025. The relatively small sample at the heart of the qualitative research dimension of the project, involving participants in a Border Awareness Encounter, will be reliably evocative but in no way are they definitive of these experiences.

(4) Under the second Trump administration, the U.S. – Mexico border has effectively been sealed. Very few migrants can enter the United States from Mexico, and the migrant shelters in El Paso are virtually empty. In addition, the vulnerability of the migrant and immigrant community to arrest, detention, and deportation makes adds to the

difficulty of obtaining testimonies from migrants and immigrants today. For those reasons, we have limited our study to Border Awareness Encounter participants.<sup>32</sup>

## **2. Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Migration**

Donald Senior: Biblical Perspectives on Migration

Gustavo Gutiérrez: Liberation Theology Perspectives on Migration

Stephen Bevans: Mission among Migrants, Mission of Migrants

Jorge Castillo Guerra: An Intercultural Theology of Migration

The drama of migration at the U.S. – Mexico border, the policy of mass detention and mass deportation of the Trump administration, and the violent and traumatic response of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents is not a new phenomenon. People have migrated from before the beginning of recorded history for the same reasons people migrate today, in search of survival and refuge, fleeing harsh climatic conditions, violence, and persecution – and like today, migrants have not always been welcome. Migration may be said, in many instances, to be “forced migration.” People migrate for a reason. There is both a push and a pull factor.

The Hebrew and Christian Bible is also a story of migration, from Abraham and Sarah in search of a land that God would show them, to the Exodus of the Israelites from

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<sup>32</sup> For migrant testimonies, see the work of three women who accompanied migrants in the shelters in El Paso and Ciudad Juárez: Mary Fontana, *Strangers in the Province of Joy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2026); Deb Hansen, *Borderlands: Stories from an El Paso Shelter* (Hannacroix, NY: Apocryphile Press, 2024); and Cristina Rathbone, *The Asylum Seekers: A Chronicle of Life, Death, and Community at the Border* (Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf Books, 2025).

Egypt to the Promised Land, to the flight of the Holy Family – Mary, Joseph, and the infant Jesus – to Egypt to escape the persecution of King Herod, before returning home.

Biblical and theological perspectives may deepen our understanding of the root causes of migration, and illuminate what is happening today, as immigrants in the United States face one of the most conflictive moments in our history, and people from the Abrahamic faith traditions – Jews, Christians, and Muslims – struggle to deepen their understanding of how God calls them and speaks to us in our encounter with migrants and refugees: “Rereading themes such as exodus, exile, diaspora, and the *via crucis* in light of the contemporary experiences of migrants and refugees can contribute much to our understanding of God, human life, and the relationship between the two.”<sup>33</sup> In the following section we look at Biblical and theological perspectives on migration.

### **2.1 Donald Senior: Biblical Perspectives on Migration<sup>34</sup>**

Donald Senior, who taught New Testament studies at Catholic Theological Union, affirms that “migration, along with the human and spiritual issues it raises, has been an intimate part of the biblical saga from the beginning,”<sup>35</sup> from the journey of Abraham and Sarah to the Exodus from Egypt to the Assyrian and Babylonian exiles and return to Jerusalem.

The same is true of the portrait of Jesus, from the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt, to Jesus’ ministry as an itinerant preacher and healer, to the journey back to God

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<sup>33</sup> See Daniel G. Groody, “Crossing the Divide: Foundations of a Theology of Migration and Refugees” *Theological Studies*, 70 (2009), 665.

<sup>34</sup> Donald Senior, “Beloved Aliens and Exiles: New Testament Perspectives on Migration,” in Daniel G. Groody and Gioacchino Campese, eds., *A Promised Land: A Perilous Journey* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2008), 20-34.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

in the resurrection. “These experiences of migration and the biblical reflection upon them would be [are] an integral part of their [our] understanding of Jesus and the Christian life.”<sup>36</sup>

Furthermore, the theological dimensions of migration may be found in three important themes in the New Testament: solidarity with the poor and the oppressed, seeking a new homeland, and welcoming the stranger.

“The portrayal of Jesus as itinerant and homeless is part of a larger portrait in the gospel literature of Jesus as in solidarity with the poor and suffering.”<sup>37</sup> In a similar manner, “the experience of migration ... is also used by a variety of New Testament traditions as a critique of false values and false security.”<sup>38</sup> The Gospel accounts also connect “the experience of migration with the biblical virtue of hospitality. Welcoming the stranger or alien is a traditional biblical injunction.”<sup>39</sup> The experience of the early Christians is also deeply connected to the experience of migration, and points to “the notion of the Christian as living in exile in this world, longing for one’s true and heavenly home.”<sup>40</sup>

In all these ways, the Bible and the Christian tradition point to “the suffering of those forced to migrate [and] remind us of the relativity of national boundaries and our obligations of justice that transcend bloodlines and family ties, and loyalty claims of our nationality.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 33.

## 2.2 Gustavo Gutiérrez: Liberation Theology Perspectives on Migration<sup>42</sup>

For liberation theologian and professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame Gustavo Gutiérrez, “migration is as old as the history of humankind.”<sup>43</sup> Like the poor in the Bible, migrants today “are nameless.” “They are born, live, and die without having left footprints, or traces of their existence, in our history.” For that very reason, one of the challenges of a theology of migration is to acknowledge that “the poor and the migrant must not remain nameless if their condition is to change.”<sup>44</sup>

To understand what it means to proclaim Good News to migrants today, we need to understand the historical and cultural context of migration. Migrants today, like the poor, are considered as “nonpersons.”<sup>45</sup> They are often forced to migrate “for economic, cultural, political, gender, and racial reasons,” but poverty remains “the main one.” As such, they are not only economically poor, but also “despised and marginalized persons as well.”<sup>46</sup>

For Gutiérrez, an option for migrants, like the preferential option for the poor, “entails working, living, playing, and being in solidarity with the materially poor,” and with migrants who are poor.<sup>47</sup> Ultimately, however, an option for migrants, like the option for the poor, “is really a ‘theocentric’ option because it is God’s option as revealed in the first testament and by Jesus.”<sup>48</sup> A theology of migration, then, “requires the

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<sup>42</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, “Poverty, Migration, and the Option for the Poor,” in Groody and Campese, *A Promised Land*, 76-86.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 79-80.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

concrete commitment to be with and to work for the poor,”<sup>49</sup> and in this context, for migrants. “How else do “we proclaim the kingdom to the migrants without defending their human dignity in solidarity with them?” Ultimately, “social justice [is] an essential part of evangelization.”<sup>50</sup>

The encounter with the migrant reality leads to “a way of doing theology” that includes both “exegesis of the scriptural texts” and “interpretation of the experience of the migrants.”<sup>51</sup> Such a theology must be done “not only about the migrants and their situation, but *from* their situation. We must learn to read the Christian message from the poor and in our case from the migrants.”<sup>52</sup> The challenge to any theology of migration rooted in solidarity is to transform “the border of death” into “a valley of life.”<sup>53</sup>

In the final analysis, an option for migrants who are poor must be “concerned with their human dignity,” such that “our aim should be for the voiceless to have their own voice.”<sup>54</sup> Such an option is ultimately grounded in “a hermeneutic of hope” that is both critical of the “unjust inequalities” that contribute to forced migration, as well as attentive to “the little hopes and short moments of joy” that are also part of the spirituality of the migrants themselves.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 81, from the title of a book by Daniel G. Groody, *Border of Death, Valley of Life: An Immigrant Journey of Heart and Spirit* (Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002).

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

### 2.3 Stephen Bevans: Mission among Migrants, Mission of Migrants<sup>56</sup>

Stephen Bevans, a professor of Mission and Culture at Catholic Theological Union, begins his article with the image of the “border Christ” outside the El Paso Catholic parish as a symbol of a migrant Church, citing this description by the former pastor of St. Pius X parish, Fr. Arturo Bañuelas: “El Paso is a border town.... So, it was appropriate that our ‘Border Christ’ would be the symbol of our Church – always on the move, not ever at home, willing to go where he is needed, but, because of his marginalized status, capable of entering all cultures and bridging all people as one.”<sup>57</sup>

Bevans speaks of both the mission *among* migrants and the mission *of* migrants: “This image of ‘the border Christ’ points ... to the fact that the church’s mission is *among* migrants. In many respects, migrants represent a continuing *via crucis* (way of the cross) of God’s people.” But just as significant is the fact that “migrants are also the *subjects* of the church’s mission ... and have precious gifts to give to the church itself – to form it more fully into the body of Christ in the world.”<sup>58</sup>

Regarding the mission of the church *among* migrants, Bevans focuses on the obligation of the church to accompany migrants on their journey: “The Church cannot remain indifferent in the way of the present plight of migrants and refugees. She wants to share their joys and griefs, be with them where they are, and be with them in their search for a better and safer life, worthy of being children of God.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Stephen Bevans, “Mission among Migrants, Mission of Migrants,” in Groody and Campese, *A Promised Land*, 89-106.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 94, Final Document, Part I, 3, *People on the Move* 35 (December 2003), 360.

The church's mission *among* migrants "begins with "the task of welcoming and hospitality,"<sup>60</sup> but a hospitality "with a strong commitment to justice,"<sup>61</sup> and to constructing "a society of solidarity, neither racist nor xenophobic."<sup>62</sup> Equally important, is attention to the root causes of migration: "The local church hosting the migrants needs to be an advocate for the liberation and development of the countries from which they come. It is not enough to be welcoming and working for the just integration of migrants into a new society. The church needs also to be involved in getting to the root of the problems that force women, men, and children to leave their homes."<sup>63</sup>

On the other hand, the mission *of* migrants to the church is "to call the church to its full catholic reality as a pilgrim people of God."<sup>64</sup> For that reason, "no one, be they migrants, refugees, or members of the local population, should be looked upon as a 'stranger,' but rather as a 'gift.'"<sup>65</sup> Migrants also "call the church to recognize its provisional, pilgrim nature," as a church "on the move," and "a community of exiles," and "to assume the risks, uncertainties, and hope" that characterize the migrant reality and point "more deeply [to] ... the God of Jesus Christ,"<sup>66</sup> a God "who is most clearly found on the margins – in the desert, at the periphery, at the frontier."<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., Final Statement, Part II, Pastoral Care, 9, in *People on the Move* 35 (December 2003), 365.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

## 2.4 Jorge Castillo Guerra: An Intercultural Theology of Migration<sup>68</sup>

Jorge Castillo Guerra, a teacher and researcher at the Nijmegen Institute of Missiology, speaks of a theology of migration that “already exists ... in daily practices and in convictions of Christian communities of migrants,”<sup>69</sup> and as something “that will be found along the journey, following the intercultural logic of a dialogue-encounter that articulates and respects differences and mutualities.”<sup>70</sup> Such a contextual and intercultural theology of migration will need to be elaborated “from the faith, life, and journey of migrant communities,”<sup>71</sup> and understood as “a part of the challenge of intercultural transformation where different realities, memories, wisdoms, reflections, and traditions weave a polycentric theology.”<sup>72</sup>

Castillo Guerra begins by looking at the contributions of liberation theology and intercultural methodology to the theology of migration, and outlines four steps in its development. First, “the starting point of a theology of migration is the reality of migration.”<sup>73</sup> On the one hand, we encounter “the migrants’ faith, hope, and love, the mysticism of migration, and the practical-sapiential theology of migration.”<sup>74</sup> On the other hand, we find “the idolatry, hopelessness, and hate – xenophobia, racism, ethnocentrism, intolerance, and exclusion – that place the migrants in a situation of suffering and marginality.”<sup>75</sup> This description of the reality of migration accurately

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<sup>68</sup> Jorge E. Castillo Guerra, “A Theology of Migration: Toward an Intercultural Methodology,” in Groody and Campese, *A Promised Land*, 243-270.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 244.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

portrays the situation of migrants at the U.S. – Mexico border today, and of immigrant communities across the United States.

A second step in developing a theology of migration has to do with a “sociopolitical and intercultural approach.”<sup>76</sup> A sociopolitical and intercultural approach is “indispensable” to understanding “the dynamics that generate poverty and marginality,” as well as “the praxis that reclaims justice.”<sup>77</sup> Such an approach is also “absolutely necessary” to understanding “in a critical way the asymmetries that are generated between and in cultures.”<sup>78</sup>

A third step in developing a theology a migration has to do with “theological systematization,”<sup>79</sup> an essential part of judging the reality of migration, leading in turn to action: Here “the challenges, impulses, or expressions that come from the faith of the migrant communities, from the reality of migration, from multicultural societies, from the need of interreligious dialogue, and the project of a society of *convivencia* are theologially reworked,” using different “historical, contextual, and intercultural hermeneutic models.”<sup>80</sup> Such a systematization includes “theological sources – the Bible, tradition, and the Magisterium, theological of the places of origin and of the societies where migrants arrive, and theologies, popular traditions, and experiences of other migrant communities.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 261.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

A fourth and final step has to do with the generation of a society of *convivencia*: “The theology of migration has now theoretical and ‘praxical’ arguments to capture and give continuity to God’s message and to God’s saving plan, and to value the great human and Christian contributions that migrations offer today.”<sup>82</sup> Here *convivencia* is both a vision to be put into practice as well as a fruit of the dialogue-encounter and interculturality between migrants and welcoming communities: “It is precisely here where a theology of migration is made relevant to the situations from which it has taken its intercultural option.”<sup>83</sup> But such a theology is also “transforming ... insofar as it reflects on and fosters the *inter* spaces of intercontextual, intercultural, interreligious, and interdisciplinary dialogue.”<sup>84</sup>

### **3. Border Context and Research Methodology**

Border Organizations and Border Awareness Programs

Research Methodology and Research Partners

Philosophical Assumptions / Interpretive Frameworks

Research Methodology: A Holistic Approach

Methodological Framework: A Narrative and Case Study Approach

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 262.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

### 3.1 Border Organizations and Border Awareness Programs

These biblical and theological perspectives on migration provide a fruitful introduction to a theology of migration that “already exists” in the daily practices and convictions” of migrant communities along the U.S. – Mexico border, and to “the intercultural logic of a dialogue-encounter” of migrants with host communities central to Border Awareness Encounters.

We begin with the reality of both the mission of the church *among migrants*, and the mission “of migrants.” The first entails welcoming migrants and refugees and providing hospitality for them, but a hospitality “with a strong commitment to justice,” and to constructing “a society of solidarity, neither racist nor xenophobic.” The second, the mission *of migrants*, is “a call to the church to its full catholic reality as a pilgrim people of God”; a “call to the Church to be Church.” “No one, be they migrants, refugees, or members of the local population, should be looked upon as a ‘stranger,’ but rather as a ‘gift.’”

In the words of Fr. Arturo Bañuelas, former pastor of St. Pius X parish, cited before: “El Paso is a border town.... So, it was appropriate that our ‘Border Christ’ would be the symbol of our Church – always on the move, not ever at home, willing to go where he is needed, but, because of his marginalized status, capable of entering all cultures and bridging all people as one.”

In the following section we provide a sample of key border organizations (Annunciation House and Hope Border Institute), border awareness programs (Encuentro Project and Maryknoll Mission Center), and participating Catholic universities and religious congregations (Creighton University and Sisters of Mercy) that together

represent essential components, along with the migrants, of what constitutes a week-long Border Awareness Encounter.

Annunciation House<sup>85</sup>: Annunciation House, a focus of migrant solidarity for more than forty years, has provided hospitality to several hundred thousand migrants and refugees in El Paso, Texas. Rooted in Catholic Social Teaching, volunteers of Annunciation House live simply and in community, in the same houses as the migrants they serve, who are mostly from Mexico and Central America. Volunteers also participate in advocacy and education around immigration issues, and seek to be a voice for justice and compassion, especially on behalf of some of the most marginalized and persecuted persons of our society – the migrants and refugees.

Annunciation House describes its border awareness program as “an immersion experience meant to raise consciousness about the issues facing the border, such as immigration, economic development, human rights, and social justice. Annunciation House developed their border awareness program in the early 1990s to facilitate face-to-face encounters between participants and people on both sides of the U.S. – Mexico border, and to educate North Americans about our roles and responsibilities in today’s globalized world.

Hope Border Institute<sup>86</sup>: The Hope Border Institute, according to their mission statement, “brings the perspective of Catholic social teaching to bear on the realities unique to our U.S. – Mexico border region. Through a robust program of research and policy work, leadership development and action, we work to build justice and deepen

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<sup>85</sup> <https://annunciationhouse.org/>

<sup>86</sup> <https://www.hopeborder.org/>

solidarity across the borderlands.” They publish a weekly analysis of the situation at the border, *Frontera Dispatch*, and comprehensive reports on border accompaniment of migrants and the root causes of migration. They work closely with the current bishop of the Catholic diocese of El Paso, Texas, Most Rev. Mark Seitz. In his 2017 pastoral letter on migration, “Sorrow and Mourning Flee Away,” Bishop Seitz said:

“Our broken system of immigration is a wound on this border community. It is a scandal to the Body of Christ in El Paso. As Christians, our mission is to announce the Kingdom in a world ‘which often goes astray and needs to be encouraged, given hope and strengthened on the way.’ As God’s people here on the border, we are called to transform this desert, making refreshing pools of the burning sands of injustice, and quenching the thirst of the oppressed. In this letter to you, the People of God in El Paso, I invite you to consider the challenges of a system which is breaking apart our community and to reflect upon how God is asking us to respond. In bold and specific ways, I wish to grow in our commitment to charity and justice on our border and towards our migrant brothers and sisters.”

The Encuentro Project / A Jesuit Ministry<sup>87</sup>: The Jesuit community in El Paso developed its Encuentro Project as an “experience [that seeks to] transform the hearts and minds of participants and open new perspectives about forced migration and asylum seeking by vulnerable people. By providing education, service, activities, reflection, prayer, and community, the Encuentro Project motivates participants to engage in peaceful, effective action for greater justice

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<sup>87</sup> <https://encuentroproject.org/>

and compassion for migrants and refugee persons as presented in Catholic Social Teaching.”

During the Biden administration, Sacred Heart, a Jesuit parish and sponsor of the Encuentro Project, opened its church facilities to more than one thousand immigrants camped out in the streets during a particularly cold December in 2022. That ministry lasted nearly two years until months prior to the inauguration of the second Trump administration, when the border was effectively closed and Border Patrol and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents began to persecute immigrants across the country through policies of mass detention and mass deportation.

Maryknoll Mission Center<sup>88</sup>: In 2019, Maryknoll Lay Missioners returned to the U.S.-Mexico border in response to the continuing immigration crisis. “The border at El Paso / Ciudad Juárez is a crossroad where cultures from the United States, Mexico, and Central America meet and enrich one another. While there is undeniable vitality in this exchange, the border is also a place of immense suffering, as migrants who have been forced to flee their homes try to overcome countless obstacles in their effort to begin a new life. Currently our missioners at the border work with immigrants by providing shelter, meals, and legal advocacy [at Las Americas]. They also work with the Encuentro Project, an immersion program that provides education on the immigration process and issues of migration.”

Creighton University / Schlegel Center for Service and Justice<sup>89</sup>: Creighton University, through its Schlegel Center for Service and Justice, has also facilitated border

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<sup>88</sup> <https://mission.maryknoll.us/2024-elpasoborderfall>

<sup>89</sup> <https://www.creighton.edu/student-experience/faith-service-justice/schlegel-center-service-justice>

awareness programs at the US – Mexico border, by sending students on week-long immersion trips as part of their university education inspired by Jesuit values. The purpose of these programs is fivefold:

“To (1) involve students in direct service with persons who suffer and experience injustice [in order] to awaken the desire and develop the capacity to act with, and on behalf of, the poor and marginalized; (2) promote and facilitate education and understanding of causes of domestic and international poverty and injustice, and the moral obligations and principles for social and political action found in Catholic Social Teaching; (3) promote student participation in advocating public policy and organizing on behalf of justice, together with persons and groups – locally and around the world – active in bringing ‘the justice of the Gospel to society and culture’ (Jesuit Social Apostolate mission statement, Rome 1998); (4) form leaders for service and justice; and (5) promote and encourage the building of communities of faith, service, solidarity, and justice while at Creighton and beyond.”

Over the past decade, the Columban Mission Center has hosted Creighton University delegations and collaborated with them on issues of immigration advocacy and justice.

Sisters of Mercy of the Americas Justice Team<sup>90</sup>: The Justice Team of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas also facilitates border awareness programs at the U.S.– Mexico border, inviting Mercy sisters, associates, and staff to participate in border immersion trips. These “educational experiences are designed to prepare participants to return home

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<sup>90</sup> <https://www.sistersofmercy.org/mercy-for-justice/immigration/borderimmersions/>

and take action by raising awareness about immigration and its root causes, as well as engaging in advocacy for justice-based immigration reforms.” Like the partnership with Creighton University, the Columban Mission Center hosted yearly Mercy delegations and collaborated with them on issues of immigration advocacy and justice.

### **3.2 Research Methodology and Research Partners**

The focus of the Columban Mission Center and Columban Border Ministry Team, like that of other border awareness programs, has been to both accompany migrants at the U.S. – Mexico border (specifically the dioceses of El Paso and Ciudad Juarez), and to facilitate week-long Border Awareness Encounters with university students and faculty, and church-affiliated groups.

The goal of these encounters is to provide a face-to-face experience of the border reality, where the stories and the cries of the migrants and refugees may be heard, motivating participants and their universities and churches to effectively respond to what they have seen and heard, touched, and experienced by advocating for comprehensive immigration reform and just and humane border policies. Such encounters often lead to a real personal conversion, as the experience challenges and invites participants to change their perspectives, and to make new and fundamental decisions about their lives.

Over the years a kind of “border pedagogy” has developed, in which university and church groups dialogue with border organizations, encounter migrants on both sides of the border in shelters staffed by church personnel, and return each night to reflect on the day’s experience.

The implied praxis in this ministry is, first, to facilitate an intercultural encounter with migrants and border organizations, and to hear firsthand their experiences and their

perspectives. Second, through a pedagogy of See-Judge-Act-Celebrate (the “pastoral circle” or “pastoral spiral”), to encourage participants to move through a process each day, and throughout the week, of social analysis and theological reflection. Finally, through the intercultural encounter and process of theological reflection, to move to transformative action and advocacy. challenging U.S. immigration and border policies on behalf of the migrants and refugees, and welcoming, protecting, promoting, and integrating migrants in their communities and parishes when they return home.

There are many stakeholders in any border awareness program, essential to the mission of intercultural encounter, mutual accompaniment, mutual solidarity, and border hospitality. For the Columban Border Awareness Encounter programs these stakeholders include:

- the Columban Mission Center in El Paso, TX, together with the Columban Border Ministry Team in Corpus Christi parish in Anapra, Ciudad Juarez, as hosts;
- the participants, which include undergraduate and graduate students and faculty from Catholic universities, Catholic parishes and Protestant churches, and a variety of faith-based initiatives with a particular interest in what is happening on the U.S. – Mexico border, who have expressed an interest in doing something more on behalf of the immigrants:
- border organizations, including the local dioceses on both sides of the border, as well as civil society organizations, assisting migrants by offering hospitality, legal aid, pastoral attention, and advocacy for immigrant justice;

- Catholic universities and religious congregations facilitating border awareness encounters by sending students, faculty, religious men and women, and associates; and

- the migrants themselves, still waiting on the Mexico side of the border, or recently released from detention and residing in shelters on the El Paso side, before moving on to other locations in the United States to pursue their asylum claims.

In addition, when participants return to their home communities, many of them do engage in efforts to welcome, protect, promote, and integrate immigrants in their local communities, inspired by their experience of a Border Awareness Encounter. These stakeholders include:

- secular and faith-based organizations in Washington D.C. and across the country, advocating for just immigration and more humane border policies;
- parish and diocesan programs to welcome, protect, promote, and integrate immigrant families in local communities; and
- national accompaniment programs like the Catholic Immigrant Prophetic Action Project (IMMPact)<sup>91</sup> and A Season of Faithful Witness.<sup>92</sup>

While there is a great deal of interaction among these stakeholders, the Border Awareness Encounters are primarily the initiative of the border hosts and border organizations. The Catholic universities, parishes, and faith-based organizations provide the participants who come to the border for a week-long experience. Further removed, but just as essential, are the advocacy organizations working for immigrant justice and

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<sup>91</sup> <https://www.ncronline.org/news/new-partnership-aims-support-churchs-ministry-migrants-refugees>

<sup>92</sup> <https://www.catholicsincommunion.org/>

humane border policies based in Washington D.C., and churches and dioceses across the country who provide hospitality to asylum-seekers throughout the country.

For nearly twenty years, the Columban Mission Center and the Columban Border Ministry Team, along with the El Paso diocese, together with other border awareness programs and border organizations, have fostered mutually beneficial and collaborative working relationships, creating a shared ministry of intercultural encounter, mutual accompaniment, mutual solidarity, and border hospitality, in both border dioceses (Ciudad Juarez and El Paso).

### **3.3 Philosophical Assumptions / Interpretive Frameworks**

In his book, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design*, John W. Creswell offers an exploration into basic philosophical assumptions that are useful in guiding our thesis project. He begins with four basic questions:

*“What is the nature of reality?”* What we mean by “reality,” is “seen through many views,” especially given the experience of migrants who have been forcibly displaced, undertaken perilous journeys, and subject to danger and insecurity as they negotiate their asylum claims on either side of the U.S. – Mexico border. Their experience of reality is vastly different from participants in week-long Border Awareness Encounters, although it is important to recognize that there are distinctions within this group as well regarding personal history, immigration status, gender, race, and sexual orientation of participants. Members of border organizations assisting the migrants provide a middle ground, as most residents on the El Paso / Ciudad Juarez border are Mexican or Mexican American, have lived, or have family, on both sides of the border, and live in extended families with mixed immigration status.

*“What counts as knowledge?”* For migrants, members of border organizations, and border awareness participants, knowledge to a high degree is based on the historical experience of their migrant journey and shaped in the context of many dynamics relating to personal history, immigration status, gender, race, and sexual orientation. The greater the degree of vulnerability, the greater the degree of the practical dimension of their knowledge, such that migrants have had to negotiate the safety of themselves and their families from the moment of their departure from their homes and countries, through a dangerous journey, and continued insecurity at the U.S. – Mexico border, and in the United States. One crucial question for investigation might be how one’s experiential knowledge changes due to these encounters between migrants, border residents, and participants in the Border Awareness Encounters.

*“What is the role of values?”* Just as one’s experience and understanding of reality and one’s knowledge depends on the context and identity of the one experiencing and understanding (migrants, border residents, border awareness participants), the same is true also for the values that one holds. The experience of extreme vulnerability and trauma can have either a positive or a negative (usually both) impact on the values that one holds deeply. For migrants, that vulnerability and trauma create a crucial need to depend on one another, and on the goodness and hospitality of those who support them on their journey and at the border. In the same way, vulnerability and trauma can exert pressure to exploit, abuse, or lead one to a level of basic survival, at any cost.

Border residents may be more likely to empathize with migrants because of their own or their family histories of migration or immigrant status, but also as Mexicans with deep roots in their Catholic and Mestizo identity, they tend to be actively engaged in and

committed to providing hospitality and shelter for migrant families. Participants in Border Awareness Encounters, depending again on their personal experience, immigration status, race, gender, and sexual orientation, may also be empathetic toward migrants, but also because of their level of educational opportunity and their exposure to Catholic values and Catholic Social Teaching, which may dispose them to respond in solidarity. For all these reasons, when a “researcher openly discusses values that shape the narrative and includes his or her own interpretation in conjunction with the interpretations of participants,” it lends itself to a deeper appreciation of intercultural encounter.

*“What is the process of research?”* The model of research that best creates a fruitful process and narrative is one that takes into account both 1) the diversity of migrants, border residents, and border awareness participants, and their diverse experiences and understandings of reality, knowledge, and values; and 2) the process and experience of encounter between these three diverse populations / identities, and how that process and experience of encounter gives rise to changing perspectives regarding reality, knowledge, and values, and how it shapes a “culture of encounter,” “mutual accompaniment,” “mutual solidarity,” and “border hospitality.”

Dualistic frameworks (objective/subjective; inductive/deductive) are not always helpful, and the process, experience, and culture of encounter is more “inter-sectional” in all the various dimensions of what inter-sectional might mean: inter-cultural, inter-racial, inter-religious, inter-generational. The more we experience diversity through the experience of encounter, the more our own experiences and identities are transformed, allowing for a broader, deeper, more diverse experience of what it means to be human, to

be more empathetic, to experience solidarity as something mutual, inter-sectional; and the more we grow in creativity and commitment to another world that is both necessary and possible, and to a Church committed to synodality, justice, peace and nonviolence, care for creation, and hospitality for migrants and refugees.

### **3.4 Research Methodology: A Holistic Approach**

In her introduction to the book, *Opening the Field of Practical Theology*, Kathleen Cahalan offers several key features of practical theology. In very broad strokes, the attention we give to the dynamics of theory and praxis, the method we choose or construct, and the goals we set for our thesis project, in large part determine how deeply our theory and praxis respond to the problem and goals we set forth for ourselves.

A deeper theory and deeper praxis, and the methods that inform our qualitative research, would need to look at the following dynamics to develop an adequate response to the reality of migrants on the border and move toward effective action that addresses justice for immigrants and humane border reform. How do we characterize what is happening at the U.S. – Mexico border, with respect to migration? These dynamics may be posed as follows.

- Are migrants simply looking for a better life for themselves and their children, a goal that is certainly worthy? Or are there conditions that are forcing migrants and their families to leave their homes and undertake a dangerous journey to seek asylum in the United States?
- What are the root causes of forced migration, for example, poverty and inequality, climate change causing hunger and disease, and social or state violence? And how has the United States contributed to these root causes by virtue of a global

economy that extracts precious resources, destroys lands, poisons water, and foments violence and war?

- What *responsibilities* do nations – including the United States – have with respect to migrants fleeing poverty, climate disasters, and violence, and what *rights* do nations have to regulate their borders? How ought these two values be balanced?

- What part do systemic racism, xenophobia, and religious persecution play in immigration and border policies?

- Catholic Social Teaching speaks of the right to migrate, but also of the right *not* to migrate. How ought these two values be balanced? What obligations do the right to migrate require of nations? What obligations do the right *not* to migrate require of nations?

- For purposes of this thesis-project, a good case could be made that U.S. policies in Mexico, Central and South America, and the Caribbean, over decades and centuries, have contributed to colonial and settler colonial practices leading to systemic poverty, inequality, exploitation of labor, and destruction of the environment, as well systemic racism, systemic violence, and destruction of indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples and cultures. How ought this to shape our investigation?

### **3.5 Methodological Framework: A Narrative and Case Study Approach**

Given the current Trump administration attacks on immigrant families and communities, and their policies of mass detention and mass deportation: How must the Church respond? If the Church is involved in welcoming migrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers at the U.S. – Mexico border, and in states and cities throughout the United States, claiming that this is a matter of religious conscience and basic to Christian identity, and if

individual states or the U.S. Congress impose laws that restrict or outlaw the work of the Church to carry out its mission, how must the Church respond?

In his February 22, 2024, statement, El Paso Bishop Seitz responded to this question in the following manner:

“Let us be clear. For the church’s part, we will endeavor to work with all in pursuit of the common good of our city and nation. We will vigorously defend the freedom of people of faith and goodwill to put deeply held religious convictions into practice. We will not be intimidated in our work to serve Jesus Christ in our sisters and brothers fleeing danger and seeking to keep their families together. We will stand in solidarity with our community’s aid workers and volunteers, with our community non-profits assisting migrants, as well as with all those in the borderlands and throughout our state living under the weight of inhumane immigration policies.”

This thesis - project argues that migrants, as agents of conscientization, evangelization, and transformation, are key to transforming the Church into a more pastoral and prophetic witness to the Gospel. Border Awareness Encounters, based on intercultural encounter, mutual solidarity, and border hospitality, involving migrants and their families, border organizations, and university and church participants, offer the opportunity for transformative experience leading to a deeper understanding of the global phenomenon and root causes of migration, a deeper experience of our Catholic faith rooted in social justice, cultural diversity, and solidarity with the poor, and a deeper commitment to social justice and the Gospel call to hospitality and welcome to immigrants in our home communities.

We have selected a narrative and case study approach to explore these questions. Border Awareness Encounters, with particular attention to the dynamics of intercultural encounter, mutual accompaniment, mutual solidarity, and border hospitality – and the role of migrants as agents of conscientization, evangelization, and transformation – provide a valuable framework for qualitative research.

*A narrative approach* involves exploring intercultural encounters through stories and shared reflections.<sup>93</sup> This approach fits well with the migrant experience and historical context of the U.S. – Mexico border. Our goal was not only to invite participants of a Border Awareness Encounter to share a reflection on their encounters with migrants on both sides of the El Paso – Ciudad Juarez border, and with border organizations and religious communities accompanying migrants on the border, but also to use their Border Awareness Encounter experience and narratives as a framework for understanding migrants as agents of conscientization, evangelization, and transformation.

*A narrative approach* offers us a way to explore how border awareness participants respond to a pedagogy of intercultural encounter, mutual accompaniment, and mutual solidarity leading to a praxis of transformation and radical hospitality for migrants and refugees in their local communities.

*A case study approach* involves sharing the narratives of participants involved in the Border Awareness Encounters and to summarize, not only what participants have

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<sup>93</sup> See Appendix 2 for some of the questions that guided our research, narrative interpretation, and reflection sessions with participants of a week-long Border Awareness Encounter at the Columban Mission Center in El Paso, Texas, in December 2025.

learned from their experience, but also how have they responded to the challenge of global migration and the presence of immigrants in their home communities.

Our case study involves a Pax Christi USA Young Adult Caucus week-long pilgrimage to the U.S. – Mexico border, hosted by the Columban Mission Center and the Columban Border Ministry Team. We document and interpret four of the twelve participants who responded to a request to write a reflection for online publication.

We do not anticipate the need for additional protection for any of the groups we propose to include in this thesis-project. Any narratives or conclusions that include encounters with migrants will be cited in a general way that does not include any personal identifiers that could put migrants in jeopardy.

#### **4. Four Narratives from a Border Awareness Encounter**

“The Border Is Everywhere”: Encounter and Accompaniment

Building a Culture of Encounter to Dispel False Narratives

Pilgrimage to a Different Border: A Study in Contrasts

Peacebuilding and Migration at the U.S. – Mexico Border

In mid-December 2025, I had the privilege of helping to host and help facilitate an intergenerational group of Pax Christi USA members on a Border Awareness Encounter, as part of the Catholic Church Jubilee Year of Hope.<sup>94</sup> The twelve participants

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<sup>94</sup> For a description of the Pax Christi group and goals of the pilgrimage, see <https://paxchristiusa.org/2026/01/20/the-border-is-everywhere-peace-pairs-pilgrimage-of-hope-at-the-border/> Five of the twelve members wrote reflections about their experience, including one by Jeanelle Wheeler called “Dare to Be Holy,” cited in this link to Pax Christi’s website.

from across the United States were involved in local immigrant support and advocacy networks; several of the participants were immigrants. Most of the group were young adults (under 40), and almost all were part of the Pax Christi Young Adult Caucus (PCYAC) and the Pax Christi USA Peace Pairs program. The group was led by Pax Christi USA's program director, Michelle Sherman.

The goals of the pilgrimage were to facilitate intercultural encounters with migrants and the border region, to debunk myths and false news headlines regarding immigrants and the borderlands, to gain factual information and personal anecdotes allowing participants to respond more effectively and justly to the plight of immigrants when they return home, to witness the Catholic presence and response of the Catholic Church along the U.S. – Mexico border to the dramatic reality of migration, and to affirm the Indigenous roots of the lands from which the migrants come, and the lands on which we currently live in the United States.

Participants met with Pax Christi El Paso, the Diocese of El Paso (including Auxiliary Bishop Anthony Celino), Annunciation House, Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center, Hope Border Institute, Maryknoll and Franciscan missionaries, *La Mujer Obrera*, the Religious of the Assumption, Jesuit priests, and historian David Romo. Some members of the group were able to cross the border to Ciudad Juarez and meet with the migrant community at the Juarez Cathedral, and with the Columban Border Ministry Team. The group also joined an interfaith prayer vigil for immigrants outside the Federal Courthouse in El Paso.

In the following section, we will examine four narratives, written by members of the Pax Christi USA Young Adult Caucus who participated in the December 2025 Border

Awareness Encounter, hosted by the Columban Mission Center and the Columban Border Ministry Team. Their testimonies were published online on the [Pax Christi USA website](#).

#### **4.1 “The Border is Everywhere”: Encounter and Accompaniment**

One refrain that we heard during the week was “the border is everywhere,” a term borrowed from Ruben Garcia, the director of Annunciation House. As one participant noted, during our travels “I was able to truly observe, to really see, just how much the border stretched across the state. There were moments when the border seemed to chase after us even.”<sup>95</sup>

But there is another meaning to this refrain, as well. In recent years, Ruben Garcia has insisted, in his talks to groups, that the border runs, not just along the U.S. – Mexico border, but through every state of the country where immigrants reside. It is also true that the border is not only a geographical region, that stretches from Texas to California, but it is also a rich and diverse cultural concept known as “the borderlands.”

Many of the participants in this Border Awareness Encounters were already involved in welcoming migrants, as one of them noted: “What I brought with me on this pilgrimage was my own love and appreciation for the immigrant community in Memphis and a curiosity about how to show up for them better, coupled with doubt and despair around whether I could do anything to support them at all.”<sup>96</sup>

What participants left with was a deeper understanding of encounter and accompaniment, “with *encounter* referring to the meeting and seeing of our fellow human

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<sup>95</sup> Markayla Love, “Encounter and Accompaniment,” <https://paxchristiusa.org/2026/01/26/encounter-and-accompaniment-peace-pairs-pilgrimage-of-hope-at-the-border-reflection-2/>

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

in the depth of their most vulnerable, taxing, and intimate moments, and *accompaniment* meaning to walk with them in their spiritual and life journey.”<sup>97</sup> The Border Awareness Encounter also provided participants with a new pedagogy, where “the practice of solidarity ... is tangible and responds to not only the spiritual needs we all possess but the physical needs that must be met as well.”<sup>98</sup>

What was even more notable was what participants carried back with them to their home communities: “There is something to be said about the joy, hope, and resilience that not only remains, but actively persists, in El Paso, in the hearts of our immigrant brothers and sisters, in all our communities and in our world. I’m praying that I too can have even a fraction of the strength that our brothers and sisters possess when journeying to the border and apply it to more consistently and effectively show up for not only my community but also for God. I’m praying for the courage to do it.”<sup>99</sup>

#### **4.2 Building a Culture of Encounter to Dispel False Narratives**

The border is also an important place of *connection*, something prominent in the teaching of Pope Francis, who speaks of “the interconnectedness of all creation,”<sup>100</sup> and “a culture of encounter, capable of transcending our differences and divisions.”<sup>101</sup> As one Border Awareness Encounter participant observed, “Building a culture of encounter

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> *Laudato Si'* 70.

<sup>101</sup> *Fratelli Tutti*, 215.

means finding siblings among strangers, recognizing that people who speak differently, as well as those who hold other beliefs, share a common identity as children of God.”<sup>102</sup>

Participants often noted how “encountering people in the borderlands serves to challenge and ultimately dispel narratives, based in fear and intolerance, that define immigrants and asylum seekers as threats to our safety.” Rather, “what the culture of encounter threatens is our own ignorance; it threatens our false superiority, our insular attitudes, our rejection of foreigners.”<sup>103</sup>

Encountering migrants at the border, not only dispels myths, but “forces us to confront our own humanity in the faces of others behind the wall.” It provides a contrast experience, and invites us to become a contrast community: “Such encounters are anathema to a government that labors to deepen divisions between people instead of combatting the myths that keep them apart.”<sup>104</sup>

One participant noted the amazing diversity of nationalities among the migrants who live on both sides of the U.S. – Mexico border: “In Texas, New Mexico and across the border in Ciudad Juárez, we spoke with people from 19 foreign countries over the course of four days. Their lives made present the drama of migration, the perilous journeys people make in search of a better life for themselves, and especially, their children.”<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Ryan Di Corpo, “Building a Culture of Encounter,” <https://paxchristiusa.org/2026/02/03/building-a-culture-of-encounter-peace-pairs-pilgrimage-of-hope-at-the-border-reflection-3/>

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

They compared the migrants they encounter to the Holy Family, who fled the slaughter of Holy Innocents and sought refuge in Egypt: “Jesus, Mary and Joseph, living in exile in Egypt to escape the fury of an evil king, are, for all times and all places, the models and protectors of every migrant, alien and refugee of whatever kind who, whether compelled by fear of persecution or by want, is forced to leave his native land, his beloved parents and relatives, his close friends, and to seek a foreign soil.”<sup>106</sup>

As noted, many of the Border Awareness Encounter participants were already assisting immigrants in their home communities: Migrants are “in your backyard, in your town, in your social circles. And the crisis, to be explicit, is not of ‘foreign invaders,’ but of a closed-off attitude that first rejects before it receives. The work of Catholics [must be to] adopt a public posture of welcome to those in need while undertaking the hard work in private to transform our hearts.”<sup>107</sup>

#### **4.3 Pilgrimage to a Different Border: A Study in Contrasts**

One of the Border Awareness Encounter participants, by her choice of poetry, reminds us that narrative may be expressed in many ways and through many mediums. Her poetry reflects the many contrasts that the border reality presents<sup>108</sup>:

*God is not mocked by  
the omniscient eye of the surveillance tower*

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., citing Pope Pius XII, *Exsul Familia*, 1952.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Kim Redigan, “Pilgrimage to a Different Border,” <https://paxchristiusa.org/2026/02/08/pilgrimage-to-a-different-border-peace-pairs-pilgrimage-of-hope-reflection-4/>. The following selections of poetry are from her journal.

*nor angels usurped by  
the hovering drones.  
In the dark El Paso night  
we light the pink candle and dare sing of hope.*

During one of the evening reflections, where participants shared their  
“immigration story,” and alludes to the biblical story of the slaughter of innocents:

*I reflect on empire’s refugees, far-flung casualties  
of cruelty,  
the dust heap of humanity  
swarmed by vultures of every variety  
pernicious predators ready to devour all that is  
decent,  
tender,  
true  
today’s anawim  
left to rot like bones in the desert  
by a system  
that has driven  
them into  
diasporas of despair.  
What does it mean to  
accompany those  
fleeing the horror of the Herods of our time?*

She also refers to the sharp contrast between dream and reality, and the stark divisions between those who would seek to seal the border, and those who hope to cross:

*El Paso sundown  
border patrol stands between  
God's dream and this wall;*

she notes the bold witness of a missionary priest devoted to Our Lady of Guadalupe who courageously accompanies the migrant community on the Mexico side of the border:

*who longs to liberate  
the Lady who has  
been frozen into  
a sterile icon  
of quiet piety.  
Unleash her  
that she may lead  
us down paths of life . . .  
that could lead to death,  
says the priest  
before he heads  
back across the border;*

And lifts up the silent, and noble, work of the migrant women, embroidering the story of their migrant journey on bags for sale to help feed their families:

*The migrant women  
weave the bright yarn in and out through*

*the thick canvas*  
*while their babies sleep nearby.*  
*Artisans of hope*  
*creating beautiful bags*  
*too small for the things they carry.*

#### **4.4 Peacebuilding at the U.S. – Mexico Border**

Finally, one of the Border Awareness Encounter participants first came to the border to work in the migrant shelters, and now helped facilitate border encounters for one of the local churches. In his dual role as both participant and facilitator, he noted how each Border Awareness Encounter is unique, and an opportunity to learn, not only from migrants and border organizations, but from each other:

“Each participant arrived with a unique life experience and background, and with hearts and minds that were curious, open, and eager both to learn and to share. The presence of Pax Christi young adult leaders created a generative exchange of wisdom and passion. I found the shared meals and the small moments in between formal sessions to be just as impactful as the scheduled activities and talks. Each moment became a fruitful encounter.”<sup>109</sup>

While contact with migrants on the El Paso side was limited on account of the second Trump administration effectively sealing the border, participants who were able to cross into Mexico had a meaningful encounter with migrants who came to the noon meal at the Juarez cathedral.

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<sup>109</sup> Hugh Truempi, “Peacebuilding and Migration Justice,” <https://paxchristiusa.org/2026/02/16/peacebuilding-and-migration-justice-peace-pairs-pilgrimage-of-hope-reflection-5/>

Throughout the week, “we [also] met with local leaders and organizers who shared their expertise on border history and offered perspectives on migrant hospitality. We visited local migrant shelters and churches, and we prayed and reflected together each day. Together, we explored a central question: ‘What does peacebuilding look like in the context of migration justice?’”<sup>110</sup>

These border reflections of four Pax Christi USA young adults express the rich diversity of their week-long Border Awareness Encounter. Each of the narratives highlights essential aspects of a Border Awareness Encounter. What we have termed “intercultural encounter,” “mutual accompaniment,” “mutual solidarity,” and “border hospitality” in our thesis-project, they have expressed as “encounter and accompaniment,” “building a culture of encounter,” “pilgrimage to a different border,” and “peacebuilding and migration justice.”

As one of the participants noted, people are profoundly touched by their week-long encounter at the border: “I departed feeling deeply connected, stirred with hope, and sweetly fatigued. Participating in this pilgrimage to the border was truly a gift.”<sup>111</sup>

## **5. Implicit Theology at the U.S. – Mexico Border**

The Descriptive – Empirical Task: Priestly Listening

The Interpretive Task: Sagely Wisdom

The Normative Task: Prophetic Discernment

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

## The Pragmatic Task: Servant Leadership

Before further exploring the impact of the Border Awareness Encounters on participants, and how migrants are agents of conscientization, evangelization, and transformation, we will delve into the implicit theology behind this phenomenon, using an analogue, another practice of intercultural encounter: the Border Mass. For more than 25 years, the Border Mass has been celebrated at the El Paso – Ciudad Juarez border to commemorate migrants and their families who have lost their lives journeying to the border, attempting to cross, and once having crossed, dying in the New Mexico or Arizona deserts. The Border Mass is a collaborative effort of three dioceses – El Paso TX, Las Cruces NM, and Ciudad Juarez, Mexico – and is held in early November, close to All Souls Day.

What is unusual about the Border Mass is that the U.S. - Mexico border, either in the form of the border fence, the border wall or, in more recent years, in the form of the Rio Grande River, divides the altar and the participants in the celebration, even as the Word of God and the Eucharist unite the people on both sides of the border as the Body of Christ, now separated by the border.

I have chosen the 2024 Border Mass as a point of departure for sharing the implicit theology of intercultural encounter, not only of the Border Mass, but of the Border Awareness Encounters as well. The Border Mass is a symbol of all that is wrong with the U.S. immigration system, and with U.S. policies that for decades have been major contributors to driving migration from Mexico and Central America, and, more recently, from Latin America and the Caribbean.

The Border Mass is also a symbol of all that is right with immigration to the United States, in terms of the hospitality of border communities and border churches who welcome, protect, promote, and integrate migrants and their families into a diverse community, where human dignity is respected, mutual solidarity is practiced, and the common good is promoted. This is, in summary, the social, cultural, political, and ecclesial reality that both contextualizes the implicit theology of migrant ministry at the border, as well as shapes it in significant ways.

I have found the four tasks of practical theology described by Richard Osmer in his book *Practical Theology*<sup>112</sup> useful to organize this reflection. I will also draw on my years accompanying refugees and displaced communities in El Salvador during the civil war, and the pastoral vision of Archbishop and now Saint Oscar Romero, to expand on these four tasks. Archbishop Romero said in an address at the Louvain six weeks before he was assassinated: “The poor tell us what the world is like, and what the mission of the Church should be.”<sup>113</sup> That vision has been at the heart of my own implicit theology and informs the implicit theology of much of the pastoral ministry with migrants and refugees at the U.S. – Mexico border.

### **5.1 The Descriptive – Empirical Task: Priestly Listening**

What is going on at the U.S. – Mexico border? Objectively speaking, we know that the U.S. immigration system has been broken for a long time, under both Republican and Democratic administrations. In past years, families have been cruelly separated,

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<sup>112</sup> Richard Osmer, *Practical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

<sup>113</sup> Archbishop and Saint Oscar Romero also emphasized the mutuality of encounter, accompaniment, solidarity, and hospitality. See <https://www.share-elsalvador.org/our-model.html>

many children have been detained on military bases, migrants and migrant children have died in detention, and migrants waiting on the Mexico side of the border have been targeted by criminal gangs and drug cartels. Furthermore, if the current Trump administration continues its policy of mass detention and mass deportation of immigrants, the social and economic cost will be catastrophic.<sup>114</sup>

Bishop Mark Seitz from El Paso, in his homily at the 2024 Border Mass, said that 853 migrants died trying to cross the border that year, and many continue to die in the New Mexico and Arizona deserts. He also told the story of a Guatemalan mother and her five-year-old daughter who attempted to cross the Rio Grande River, were separated by the strong current, and the child drowned. This happened in August 2024, not far from where the Border Mass took place, when torrential rains caused the river to swell.

For much of the U.S. – Mexico border, and for much of the year, the Rio Grande River is just a shallow stream, a consequence of the ecological impact of climate change, decades-long droughts in the Southwest, and the drying up of rivers like the Rio Grande and the Colorado due to the greed of industrial agriculture.

What is happening at the U.S. – Mexico border?

While the objective reality is bleak, the subjective reality lived by migrants and their families is even more heart wrenching as they tell their stories to those who take time to listen, including participants in Border Awareness Encounters. Listening, in fact, is key to pastoral ministry, but also to theology, because we believe that the face of God

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<sup>114</sup> <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/report/mass-deportation/>

in Christ is revealed in every face and every encounter with those who are vulnerable (Matthew 25:31-46), and each migrant has an ethical claim on what we do: “*The blood of your brother [and sister] cries out from the earth*” (Genesis 4:10).

Pastoral ministry to migrants takes place on both sides of the border. In Mexico, the work includes accompanying and sheltering migrants, providing a noon meal at the Juarez Cathedral, assisting migrants in finding the material and legal aid they need to help them in their asylum claims, attending to their spiritual needs through biblical reflections and attention from the Columban parish, Corpus Christi, in Anapra, an extremely poor section of Juarez near the U.S. – Mexico border.

On the U.S. side, pastoral ministry includes accompanying and sheltering migrants, but also facilitating week-long Border Awareness Encounters with university students and faculty, and church-affiliated groups. The goal of these encounters is to provide a face-to-face experience of the border reality, where the stories and the cries of the migrants may be heard, hopefully motivating participants and their universities and churches to effectively respond to what they have seen and heard, touched and experienced, by serving immigrants back home and advocating for comprehensive immigration reform.

Pope Francis, in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, challenges us to hear both “the cry of the earth” and the “cry of the poor.” Here on the border both cries are present: we hear the cries of migrant mothers for their children, the cries of migrant fathers desperately trying to cross the border to find work and send money back to their families, the cries of migrant children separated from their parents.

We also hear the cries of the earth due to climate change, disrupting centuries-old agricultural patterns and unleashing devastating hurricanes in the lands from which migrants are fleeing; and the cries of the earth in the lands of Mexico and Central America and the Southwest desert in the U.S, where droughts make farming impossible and ancient migrant routes impassible, converting desert landscapes into cemeteries for migrants in search of life.

The border is a place of contrasts: light and darkness / lamentation and hope. Here it is even more essential to hear the life stories of these migrants, who evoke the stories of our own migrant ancestors, or our enslaved ancestors, or our ancestors who were driven from their Indigenous lands. The border is a liminal space, set amid rivers and deserts that evoke the stories of our Biblical ancestors, wandering Arameans, people of Exodus and Exile, and the Holy Family in flight to Egypt. The border is rich in theology, both explicit and implicit, and migrants are the human face of God revealed in our encounters with them.

Salvadoran Archbishop Saint Oscar Romero said, shortly before he was martyred in 1980, that the poor are those who tell us, “What the world is, and what the Church’s service to the world should be.” In an address at the University of Louvain entitled, “The Political Dimension of Faith from the Perspective of the Option for the Poor,”<sup>115</sup> Romero said the pastoral ministry of the Archdiocese of San Salvador was marked, in a first instance, by “incarnation in the world of the poor.”

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<sup>115</sup> <https://www.romerotrue.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/1980-02-02-Louvain.pdf>

In a similar way, the pastoral ministry with migrants of the Dioceses of El Paso and Ciudad Juarez is one that is deeply incarnate in the drama of migration at the border, and migrants have played a crucial role in shaping the Church's response. It is the migrants who, by their very presence, have conscientized people about the dramatic reality of migration – beginning with its root causes, the perilous migrant journey, and persecution on both sides of the U.S. – Mexico border; and evangelized people, calling the Church to its true Gospel foundation and witness, making visible and urgent the call of Matthew 25 to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, to welcome the stranger, visit those who are ill or in prison, and be willing to suffer persecution for the sake of the Gospel.

## **5.2 The Interpretive Task: Sagely Wisdom**

Why are we closing our borders to people fleeing for their lives? Why are we demonizing migrants and separating parents and children? Why are we telling them: “Don’t come?” Why is this happening at the U.S. – Mexico border? The plight of migrants is an ancient one, and today it has become a global phenomenon. More people are forcibly displaced, crossing borders, living in refugee camps, seeking asylum, being detained and deported, than ever before in human history. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that at least 123 million were *forcibly displaced* in 2024, a number projected to grow two or three times in the future.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> <https://unrefugees.ch/en/news/global-displacement-record-high-unhcrs-2024-global-trends-and-why-it-matters-switzerland>

These questions are important ones for pastoral ministry with migrants at the border. They are important questions we raise with participants in the Border Awareness Encounters. They are not only questions that naturally occur in the face of a phenomenon we don't understand. They take on urgency, especially after an encounter with the suffering of migrants at the border. Migrants live these questions, and for them the response to these questions is a matter of life and death.

Why is this going on?

In many ways, the plight of the migrants appears to be like the plight of Job, who lost everything, and yet Job was a good and upright person, like so many migrant men and women whom we meet, and so many children. Why do they suffer? It is the ancient question: why do the innocent suffer? Where is God in this picture? Either God is a good God but powerless; or God is powerful but chooses not to do anything. Either way, it is a wager of faith. Both conclusions have led many people to lose their faith. But for the migrant poor, we often find a deeper faith that points both to God's faithful love *and* the human causes of suffering and oppression.

This is even more reason for us to broaden the frame of reference by which we understand realities that have human causes and point to the mystery of evil; but also, the mystery of self-sacrificing love embodied for Christians in the life of Jesus. We may not fully understand why things are as they are, but we do need to make a choice: either we close our eyes to such realities as that which takes place at the border – and increasingly in urban and rural communities across the United States where immigrants are subject to mass detention and mass deportation – and become indifferent; or we keep our eyes fixed

on the plight of the migrants and immigrants and we do what is within our capacity as citizens and as Christians to respond.

Here it is important to look at models of interpretation so that we can understand better, not only what is going on, but also why, and to make a difference by responding as effectively as we can. I find the perspectives of critical social theory and the church as a contrast society to be most fruitful in guiding the process of pastoral ministry on the border, and in parishes and dioceses across the United States. The following description of critical social theory is insightful:

“The purpose of a *critical* social theory is to critique and transform society, providing guidance to emancipatory movements and praxis. Critique involves identifying the way social structures and ideas systematically benefit some classes and groups of people while oppressing others. It examines social formations and practices to determine whose interests are being served. Empirical research, thus, strives to contribute to human emancipation, guided by the comprehensive perspective of a critical theory of society. It explores social relations and institutions to unmask forms of domination and to enhance resistance and human liberation.”<sup>117</sup>

In a similar fashion, the notion of the church as a contrast society is fruitful for envisioning the goals and practices of pastoral ministry at the U.S. – Mexico border, as well as in communities and dioceses across the country where immigrants reside. Suffice it to say that the notion of “the church as a contrast society,” or as “a catalyst of social transformation,” is one in which an alternative vision involving “a reversal of power and

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<sup>117</sup> Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 77.

authority” is embodied in the practices of the church and as a model for the society at large.<sup>118</sup>

Pastoral ministry with migrants at the border – and increasingly in parishes and dioceses across the United States – engages in emancipatory practices and alternative visions that protect and promote the human dignity of the migrants and immigrants, and the common good of the communities and nations, wherever migrants and immigrants reside, as the heart of its Gospel witness. Such practices include direct services, accompaniment to immigration court dates, know your rights trainings, legal services for asylum claims, public witness – all forms of that involve intercultural encounter, mutual accompaniment, mutual solidarity, and hospitality.

Archbishop Romero regarded the proclamation of the Gospel, proclaiming good news to the poor amid a world in which they have only heard bad news, a second step after becoming a church incarnated in the world of the poor. Such a proclamation, as evidenced by his weekly homilies carried by radio transmission throughout El Salvador, involved announcing hope to the poor, as well as denouncing the grave injustices committed by the government and military, eventually leading to his martyrdom while celebrating Eucharist at the altar.

### **5.3 The Normative Task: Prophetic Discernment**

What ought to be going on at the border?

We have alluded to this question by way of envisioning comprehensive immigration reform and a Church responding to the reality of the migrants and bearing

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

witness to the four dimensions of pastoral ministry with migrants expressed by Pope Francis in his pastoral letters to migrants and refugees, and reiterated by the bishop of Ciudad Juarez at the 2024 Border Mass: welcome, protection, promotion, and integration.

While the focus of migration has been for many years the U.S. – Mexico border, Ruben Garcia, the founder of Annunciation House in El Paso – who has put into practice these four values of pastoral ministry to migrants for more than forty years – has reminded us that “the border is everywhere,” residing in every state and many local communities throughout the country. Migrants have become the object of division, polarization, xenophobic racism, and political violence, not only on the U.S. – Mexico border, but in every state and major urban center throughout the country.

This is increasingly the case with the second Trump administration policy of mass detention and mass deportation, as was clearly evident in the violence of Border Patrol and ICE agents in Minneapolis in January. The questions – “What is going on?” “Why is this happening?” and now “What ought to be going on?” – are questions that are, or ought to be, asked in every state and every church in the nation.

Here, the recourse to Scripture, especially the vision of the prophets and Jesus’ prophetic witness, provide a vision for the future. The vision of the prophet Isaiah of the Messianic banquet, when all of creation will be transformed, is especially inspiring: *“Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.”* (35:5-6)

We need only remember the vision of the Last Judgment in the Gospel of Matthew to recognize the face of Christ in every migrant, and the judgment we bring

upon ourselves as a nation – as this passage is addressed not to individuals but to nations – by not welcoming the stranger, the sojourner, the migrant (Matthew 25:31-46). The Beatitudes also provide an alternative vision which is not just an empty hope, but a vision that requires Christians as well to prepare the way by our actions of hospitality, solidarity, justice, and *shalom* (Matthew 5:1-12). The Lukan version makes clear that those who fail to heed the message of the Beatitudes will face a harsh judgment (6:20-26).

The fate of migrants – those waiting on the Mexico side of the border, those still on the journey, those not yet begun but soon to embark on this perilous journey, and those already living in the shadows, undocumented, in many urban and rural communities across the United States – hangs in balance. The answer to these questions we have been asking - “What is going on?” “Why is this happening?” and now “What ought to be going on?” – converge and point to another question, the question of root causes.

It will not be possible to defend “the right to migrate” unless we can also defend “the right not to migrate.” What do we mean by that? Unless we can address the root causes of forced migration – and here, the word “forced” is important. The decision to migrate is not taken lightly, especially as it entails family separation and great risks – and migrants will continue to journey across borders and seek asylum in exponentially growing numbers until the reasons why people migrate is addressed.

By addressing the root causes of forced migration – among them systemic poverty, climate change, social and political violence, systemic racism – we have a clearer picture of how migrants are at the mercy of human traffickers, drug cartels, corporate greed, racist governments, and racist violence. It is crucial to defend “the right not to migrate,” which will only be possible by addressing and radically altering the root

causes of forced migration, including U.S. trade and investment policies, a global extractive economy, and political support for corrupt and authoritarian leaders who oppress and persecute the poor. To effectively address the root causes of forced migration will not be easy, and will take time – years, if not decades to create conditions so that people are not forced to migrate.

Until then, the right to migrate, and the Gospel call to the churches to welcome, protect, promote, and integrate migrants and refugees into their communities, remains an urgent call.

Archbishop Romero, in addition to incarnating the church in the world of the poor, and proclaiming a Gospel of life and justice for the poor, also defended the right of nonviolent social movements to promote, protect, and defend the rights of diverse social sectors in the face of repressive violence. In a similar fashion, Pope Francis has called together, on three occasions, representatives of social movements from around the world to promote the crucial work of defending the rights of the poor and oppressed. The defense of migrants was necessary under the Biden administration, with the exponential growth of forced migration; it is even more necessary under the current Trump administration, with the sealing of the U.S. – Mexico border, and a policy of mass detention and mass deportation.

For many years now, border churches have collaborated with border organizations doing social analysis on forced migration and advocating for comprehensive immigration reform, defending the human rights of migrants, and assisting them in their material needs, including legal assistance, pastoral accompaniment, and public witness to protest policies of border militarization, mass detention, and mass deportation. This brings us to

the fourth and final dimension of pastoral ministry with migrants at the border – the pragmatic task.

#### **5.4 The Pragmatic Task: Servant Leadership**

We now come to the fundamental question, the question the previous three questions have been leading up to: How might we respond to the plight of the migrants at the U.S. – Mexico border? What can we do – as border communities, in towns and cities across the nation, and as a nation, but also as parishes, local dioceses, and as Christians and citizens of the United States to respond?

The image of servant leadership as an image for the pragmatic task of pastoral ministry with migrants is a fruitful one, both in its roots in the prophet Isaiah as well as in the witness of Jesus throughout his life among the poor, leading up to his passion and death on the cross. Let us listen first to the prophet Isaiah:

*“Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one with whom I am pleased. Upon him I have put by spirit; he shall bring forth justice to the nations.”* (Isaiah 42:1)

*“It is too little ... for you to be my servant, to raise up the tribes of Jacob and restore the survivors of Israel; I will make you a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.”* (Is 49:6)

Here the question is: “Who is this servant?” In Isaiah’s time it was the remnant of Israel, the poor of the land. In our day, we are invited to see migrants as the suffering servant, the ones who in the injustice they suffer are the favored ones of God *“to bring forth justice to the nations”* and to be *“a light to the nations.”*

What does this mean for us, for those of us in rich nations who choose to close their borders to our migrant sisters and brothers? We do well to heed Isaiah's words:

*"Who among you fears the Lord, heeds his servant's voice? Whoever walks in darkness and without any light yet trusts in the name of the Lord and replies upon their God!" (Is 50:10)*

Tradition also identifies Jesus with the suffering servant, both in his earthly ministry, where *"he brings forth justice to the nations,"* and is *"a light to the nations";* but also in his passion, where he resembles the suffering servant of the prophet Isaiah: *"He was pierced for our sins, crushed for our iniquity. He bore the punishment that makes us whole; by his wounds we were healed."* (Is 53:5)

Here the image of the servant leader comes into play, beginning with crossing boundaries and leading to fellowship with Christ's suffering:

"Jesus was constantly crossing social boundaries to bring God's love to those who were not among the 'good people' of Israel: the sick, the marginalized, the poor, and even the corrupt like Zacchaeus. Early Christian communities gave witness to this sort of boundary crossing by bringing together people with radically different social standing in the Greco-Roman world: slave and free, men and women, Greeks and Jews, and rich and poor."<sup>119</sup>

The biblical theologian Gerhard Lohfink, in his book *Jesus and Community: The Social Dimension of the Christian Faith*,<sup>120</sup> speaks of this vision of the Church as "a

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<sup>119</sup> Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 195.

<sup>120</sup> Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community: The Social Dimension of the Christian Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1984).

contrast society.” Such a vision applies both to the internal organization of the congregation, as well as to its external witness. Osmer describes it in this way:

“As a *contrast society*, congregations embody in their internal relationships and their relations with their neighbors an alternative power and authority as conventionally practiced in the world. Domination, violence, and advantage seeking are not true power. God’s power takes the form of a servant who embodies self-giving, suffering love. A congregation that takes the form of a servant represents an alternative to the ways of the world. It opens a new set of possibilities that may have a *catalytic* effect, evoking social transformation.”<sup>121</sup>

If you have ever visited the U.S. – Mexico border, you would have discovered this kind of servant leadership and contrast society, among the border communities, in the migrant shelters, and the border churches – on both sides of the border. Today, since the second Trump administration effectively sealed the border, this kind of solidarity is more difficult to find; but it is still there. A genuine encounter with migrants still takes place – especially on the Mexico side of the border – and a genuine spirit of service can be found in many places. Many young people discover their faith for the first time, and many vowed religious experience a renewal of their vows. The migrants, in turn, experience a spirit of intercultural encounter, border hospitality, mutual solidarity, pastoral accompaniment, and healing from trauma and violence.

There is another dimension to servant leadership, one leading to “a process of deep change” and an intimate “fellowship with Christ’s suffering,” For many people, this

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<sup>121</sup> Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 191.

takes place in a deeply personal way. For those in positions of leadership, it often leads to “resistance and conflict, failures and disappointments,” both in the social as well as the ecclesial realm: “Like Christ, they will suffer hardships,” and as a result “they will enter into the fellowship of Christ’s suffering.”<sup>122</sup>

Osmer mentions three phenomena that servant leaders experience, that on the surface appear contradictory: “You will find your way only by getting lost.” “You will gain power by empowering others.” “The less you are attached to the congregation, the deeper your relationships.”<sup>123</sup> I have witnessed these experiences in others, and in myself, during my time at the border, as well at home in my parish and in the Archdiocese of Washington DC. The way forward is not always clear, but that’s what it means to “live according to the Spirit.” In the phrase of the Spanish poet, Antonio Machado, and one that describes the reality of the migrant journey: “We make the road by walking.”<sup>124</sup>

Archbishop Romero, in his address at the Louvain six weeks before he was assassinated at the altar, in addition to incarnation in the world of the poor, proclaiming the Gospel, and defending the right of the poor to organize, also spoke of “sharing the same fate as the poor.” He meant by that, the fidelity of a church that is so identified with the poor, it will suffer persecution and martyrdom, as he ultimately did. But in doing so, it will also experience “the fellowship of Christ’s suffering.”

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 196-98.

<sup>124</sup> From a poem by Spanish poet Antonio Machado, and sung by the Catalan musician Joan Manuel Serrat:  
<https://duckduckgo.com/?q=antonio+machado+caminante+no+hay+camino+and+song+&t=ffab&ia=videos&iax=videos&iai=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com%2Fwatch%3Fv%3D6ZY65imDifM>

The churches on the border have to date experienced resistance and conflict, failures, and disappointments, for their defense of the migrants and for challenging the failure of governments on both sides of the border to adequately address the plight and the suffering, the injustice, and the violence experienced by migrants and their families.

This is increasingly so in parishes and dioceses across the United States, and in urban and rural areas where the Border Patrol and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents have responded to immigrants, and those who protect and defend them, with violence. We only need recall the literal “invasion” by thousands of Border Patrol and ICE agents of Minneapolis during January 2026, in which two U.S. non-immigrant citizens were murdered: Rene Good and Alex Pretti.<sup>125</sup>

Under the current Trump administration, leaders of churches and pastoral agents have experienced more fully what it means to share “the same fate of the poor,” as Archbishop Romero did. For now, the migrant journey continues, truly a migrant and immigrant Way of the Cross. For migrants and immigrants, every day is Good Friday, though sometimes, in our intercultural encounters with migrants, refugees, and immigrants, we experience glimpses of the resurrection.

The God who spoke to Mary in her Magnificat of the triumph of God’s justice –  
*“God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good*

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<sup>125</sup> <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/twin-cities-on-edge-as-ice-raids-ignite-fear-and-protests>; and <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/a-timeline-of-trumps-immigration-crackdown-in-minnesota>

*things, and sent the rich away empty*” (Luke 1:51-3) – is the same God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead.

At the 2024 Border Mass, the Gospel reading was “the road to Emmaus.” It’s a good reading to capture the implicit and explicit theology of border ministry with migrants, as it truly captures the conversations along the way, the disappointments at what happens in the power centers of nations, including our own, and our struggles to find and make the road ahead by walking. The grace is that in our intercultural encounters with migrants, refugees, and immigrants and their families; in our mutual solidarity expressed through direct service, mutual accompaniment, and public witness; and in our shared experience of hospitality, Christ is present in the breaking of the bread.

Our eyes see what was always there before us – the embodied risen Christ present with his wounds still fresh – and on our journey back to our home communities. As we share the Good News we have experienced at the border, and wherever we encounter the crucified and risen Christ in our migrant and immigrant sisters and brothers, we bear witness to our encounter with Jesus on the road to Emmaus. Just as our eyes were opened to what was happening in our midst, and we heard the Scriptures proclaimed to us in new and amazing ways that changed our lives forever, so too we encounter migrants, refugees, and immigrants – as agents of conscientization, evangelization, and transformation.

Our lives are transformed, our communities and parishes are transformed, and the seeds of transformation are sown in our Church and in our society as well. How we treat migrants, refugees, and immigrants – the ones who sojourn among us – will be the basis upon which we will be judged by God on the last day – as a Church and as a nation (Matthew 25:31-46).

## 6. A Ministry of Reconciliation and Accompaniment of Migrants

Robert Schreiter: Migrants and the Ministry of Reconciliation

The Ministry of Reconciliation at the U.S. – Mexico Border

David Hollenbach: Migrants and the Ministry of Accompaniment

The Catholic Immigrant Prophetic Action Project (IMMPact)

A Season of Faithful Witness: A Pastoral Call to Hope

### 6.1 Robert Schreiter: Migrants and the Ministry of Reconciliation<sup>126</sup>

Robert Schreiter, who taught theology at Catholic Theological Union and was a consultant to *Caritas Internationalis* on matters of peacebuilding and reconciliation, offers “a first attempt to develop a framework for a ministry of reconciliation and healing among migrants.”<sup>127</sup> He addresses three stages of migration, beginning with “leaving one’s home or one’s homeland,”<sup>128</sup> followed by “transit to the new situation,”<sup>129</sup> and finally, the moment when migrants must “settle into their new situation.”<sup>130</sup> In each of these stages, migrants are likely to experience trauma. The status of migrants may change, from being *displaced people* within their own country, to being *refugees* once they cross the border into another country where they become asylum seekers.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Robert Schreiter, “Migrants and the Ministry of Reconciliation,” in *A Promised Land*, ed. Groody and Campese, 107-123. See also Schreiter, “A Practical Theology of Healing, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation,” in *Peacebuilding: Catholic Theology, Ethics, and Praxis*, 368-375.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 108-109.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 109-110.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 110-11.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

Schreiter also points out that the migrants themselves are “the most obvious subject of a ministry of healing and reconciliation,” though the migrant’s community, their family, and the host community must also be considered in the work of healing and reconciliation.<sup>132</sup> For Schreiter, the Christian understanding of reconciliation is founded on five distinctive elements:

First, “God is the agent of reconciliation ... and leads and resolves the reconciliation process,” though human beings and the migrants “play an active role.”<sup>133</sup> Second, “healing begins with the victim,” in this case the migrant.<sup>134</sup> Third, “the healing brought about in the reconciliation process takes the victim to a new place,” what the Christian tradition refers to as “a new creation.”<sup>135</sup> Fourth, “the migration story has to be reframed,” such that “the dignity and worth of the victim” is upheld.<sup>136</sup> Finally, “the healing process of reconciliation is never complete.... Ultimately, God ... is the agent of reconciliation.”<sup>137</sup>

For Schreiter, the ministry of healing and reconciliation involves three dimensions: the pursuit of justice, the healing of memories, and recovering agency as a migrant. First, “justice is not seen as an alternative to reconciliation, but rather as a condition for its fulfillment,”<sup>138</sup> and justice requires “breaking the silence” and “establishing the truth.”<sup>139</sup> “To tell the story of suffering and to speak the truth about what happened is to restore right relationships with the past and the events that

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 114-15.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 115-16.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 117.

occurred,”<sup>140</sup> Justice also involves overcoming “discrimination, racism, and xenophobia,” and “a host of injustices regarding housing, employment, and forms of social welfare.”<sup>141</sup> Finally, justice requires “the migrant’s regaining agency ... in accord with the Christian understanding of human dignity and equal regard.”<sup>142</sup>

Another aspect of the ministry of healing and reconciliation involves “the healing of the painful and traumatic memories that can mark any of the three stages of migration.”<sup>143</sup> Such healing requires both “gaining access to the memories, and the retelling and reframing of the memories.”<sup>144</sup> Gaining access to memories may include “healing circles,” or “safe and welcoming spaces where the victim can examine the past in the company of sympathetic listeners,” and become “the human counterpart of God’s healing work in the life of the victim.”<sup>145</sup>

Finally, “the experience of healing in the Christian understanding of reconciliation does take people to a new place,” and “the goal or task of this recovery of agency come[s] into fuller relief.”<sup>146</sup> This new place may involve reframing one’s status as “victim” to one of “survivor.”<sup>147</sup> Such a new understanding of one’s status may involve “a sense of call or vocation,”<sup>148</sup> such that “the migrant can assume his or her highest sense of agency as a minister of reconciliation, by moving from victim to the healer of others.”<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 122.

## 6.2 The Ministry of Reconciliation at the U.S. – Mexico Border

The trauma present on the U.S. – Mexico border is very real, and impacts migrants and refugees as well as border organizations, religious communities, and border churches providing accompaniment, service, and advocacy on behalf of migrants and their families. The migrants and their families who arrive at the border are traumatized.<sup>150</sup>

Many, especially those who have journeyed from South America, have made incredible and life-threatening journeys through harsh environments like the jungle in the Darien Gap of Panama, where they have been subject to assault, kidnapping, separation from their families, rape, and death.<sup>151</sup> Those who survive this ordeal then join Central American and Mexican migrants and refugees on a journey through Mexico, riding atop freight trains, and subject to cartel and military violence along the way. Many do not survive.

Robert Schreiter describes the way deep personal and social trauma expresses itself in migrants and their families as a need for healing, a need to tell their story, what he calls “truth-telling.”<sup>152</sup> How *do* the migrants live through dark times with hope in their seemingly impossible quest for justice? How do border communities, religious communities, and border churches that minister with migrants and their families, live with hope in dark times? They too, like migrants and refugees, are traumatized and in

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<sup>150</sup> In Greek, the word for wound is *trauma*; in Latin, the word for wound is *vulnus*, from which comes the word “vulnerability.” These associations make for a fuller understanding of “wound,” “trauma,” and “vulnerability,” especially in relationship to healing.

<sup>151</sup> See [www.youtube.com/watch?v=XMPX1547Pss](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XMPX1547Pss).

<sup>152</sup> Robert Schreiter, “A Practical Theology of Healing, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation, in *Peacebuilding: Catholic Theology, Ethics, and Praxis*, 386.

need of healing. They too have stories to tell,<sup>153</sup> and for them justice also remains a distant goal. Telling one's story also carries with it the risk of further traumatization: "Memories of traumatic suffering can obtrude into the present and disrupt a process of healing and reintegration."<sup>154</sup>

What does the healing process look like? Schreiter names two practices that form the heart of healing: witnessing, and retelling the story: "*Witnessing* refers to the calling forth of memory in a public and shared way," and involves "an act of fidelity to the dead," attesting "to loss and absence," that "begins a quest for the truth," and "makes memory public and shareable."<sup>155</sup> *Retelling the story* is the process of reframing one's story, "of constructing [a] new narrative ... The retelling involves a transformation of the narrative of events from a narrative of loss, humiliation, and defeat to a narrative of recovery, redemption, and new resolve."<sup>156</sup>

In intercultural encounters with migrants and refugees in the shelters, it is possible to hear some of the ways these survivors bear witness to what they have experienced, including remembering those who did not survive the journey, and those who in flight experienced the loss and the absence of loved ones. The quest for truth and the making public of what they have experienced may still be distant goals. These migrants and refugees are still in a mode of surviving. But once they have crossed the border into the

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<sup>153</sup> Three examples of books written by pastoral workers who worked in Annunciation House shelters in El Paso are Deb Hansen, *Borderlands: Stories from an El Paso Shelter* (Hannacroix, NY: Apocryphile Press, 2024); Cristina Rathbone, *The Asylum Seekers: A Chronicle of Life, Death, and Community at the Border* (Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf Books, 2025); and Mary Fontana, *Strangers in the Province of Joy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2026).

<sup>154</sup> Schreiter, "A Practical Theology of Healing, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation," *Peacebuilding: Catholic Theology, Ethics, and Praxis*, 381.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 382.

United States, they often feel a deep sense of relief, even gratitude, as well as grief and sorrow. Their faith in God is humbling to those who encounter them.

The reframing or the retelling of the migrant story is a work in progress. Only migrants can tell their story, and when they do their stories enable the work that “makes memory public and shareable.”<sup>157</sup> They inform the quest for the truth and the quest for justice so essential for addressing the root causes of forced migration and advocating for radical changes to our borders, and to our asylum and immigration system.

In addition to healing and truth-telling, justice and forgiveness are also essential components of reconciliation: “No part of the healing after conflict stands out more clearly than the need to pursue justice. This is important not only for the victims who have been wronged during the conflict, but also for the reconstruction of society.”<sup>158</sup> In the context of forced migration, justice means addressing the root causes of migration as well as the need for comprehensive immigration reform and honoring the right to asylum.

Forgiveness, too, both in an individual and a social context, is important to reconciliation. “Social forgiveness” has many meanings, but at a minimum it involves “acknowledgment [of the wrong done], apology, and atonement.” Put another way, “forgiveness involves not letting the past determine the future. Forgiveness is about the transformation of relationships.”<sup>159</sup> In the present context in the United States of mass detention and mass deportation of immigrants, and violence against immigrant

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 381.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 388.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 392.

communities, such forgiveness will require at a minimum moral reparation for the damage and harm done.

How do we understand the experience of the migrant, as we look at the very concrete wounds that they bear? How do we understand the global phenomenon of migration as a wound caused by violence and war, climate change and environmental destruction, systemic racism and xenophobia, and the disparities of a global extractive economy? Viewed against the background of five centuries of racialization and domination, the current phenomenon of global migration to the U.S. – Mexico border is yet one more consequence and visible sign of the legacy of European settler colonization that resulted in the genocide of Indigenous peoples and the enslavement of African peoples in the Americas. Indeed, such settler colonialism created and imposed borders when none existed before, giving rise to the phrase: “No one is illegal on stolen land.”<sup>160</sup>

We live in a globalized world, and a global extractive economy, where, in the words of Robert Schreiter, “Intercultural encounter on whatever scale is frequently conflictual; calls for dialogue and mutuality often express more hope than reality.”<sup>161</sup> Migrants are survivors of globalization, and to be more precise, a globalization imposed on the global South by the global corporate economy and nations of the global North, based on racialization and the destruction of the environment – and the greed that motivates both corporations and nations. But migrants are not only survivors, nor only

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<sup>160</sup> For a legal perspective on the meaning of this phrase, see <https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2761&context=ulj>

<sup>161</sup> Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997, 12.

victims; they are persons of human dignity and human courage, by virtue of their resistance and resilience in their struggle for justice and struggle for life.

Carlos Marentes, director of the Farmworker Center in El Paso, speaks of migration as “a form of resistance.”<sup>162</sup> Such resistance speaks not only to the deepest wells of human experience and dreams of human flourishing, but also to the amazing creativity of migrants and refugees throughout their journey, and to immigrants across the United States and across many generations. Migrant and refugee stories provide countless examples of the power of active nonviolence to enable migrants not only to survive, but also to form bonds of solidarity with each other, and to thrive.

In Marentes’ words, expressed in a Pax Christi International webinar on nonviolence and the border that took place in 2024: “Nonviolence is the creative power of love in action, opposing violence, transforming conflict, fostering dignity, restoring justice, building peace, and cultivating reconciliation, all without violent means.”<sup>163</sup>

It is precisely in the experience of the migrant, in the global context of forced migration, that we see the emergence of new understandings and practices of nonviolence that intercultural encounters make possible, giving rise to the possibility of reconciliation based on truth and just peace.

Truly, God is at work in human history, and the narrative and praxis of healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation, as outlined by Schreiter, is one that provides hope for

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<sup>162</sup> Carlos Marentes, testimony on a webinar organized by Pax Christi International, Catholic Voices Confronting Violence with the Power of Active Nonviolence, “Migration in the Americas Roundtable 2023,” a contribution to the Vatican Synodal Process, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VtY51aIBRSk>. His contribution appears at minute 1:02:12.

<sup>163</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VtY51aIBRSk>. Carlos Marentes’ testimony begins at minute 1:02 and ends at minute 1:12.

another world, where migrants and refugees and immigrants are welcomed, protected, promoted and integrated into nations, and human dignity and human rights are protected.

### **6.3 David Hollenbach: Migrants and the Ministry of Accompaniment**

David Hollenbach, S.J., who holds the University Chair in Human Rights and International Justice at Boston College, offers a good introduction to the phenomenon of global migration and forced displacement affecting millions of human beings, both migrants and refugees, and the need for accompaniment.<sup>164</sup> While refugees “are legally defined as people who have fled across an international border because of a ‘well-founded fear of being persecuted,’” migrants may include people who are forcibly “displaced inside their own countries by war, human rights violations, and natural or human-made disasters,” and as such, cross an international border in order to seek safety and sometimes asylum in another country.<sup>165</sup>

Poverty is not only a major cause of global migration, but also a result of forced displacement, and migrants who leave their homes, for whatever reason, experience both danger and insecurity, sometimes exceeding what they experienced in the country they left behind: “The involuntary movement of people threatens their most basic human rights, such as having a home, sustaining their family, moving freely, having some say in the political life that shapes their fate, and even surviving.”<sup>166</sup>

According to Hollenbach, the growing phenomenon of global migration, and the injustices that drive migration, “imply that there is something seriously wrong with a

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<sup>164</sup> David Hollenbach, S.J., “Accompaniment, Service, and Advocacy: Responding to Global Poverty and Displacement, in *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*, Volume 44, Article 6, September 2013, 10-12.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

system of global politics that fails to protect so many millions of people.”<sup>167</sup> Faced with the inability of nation states to respond to this global crisis, “nongovernmental agencies, including religious communities,” provide a crucial link to addressing the challenge of global migration in “an increasingly interconnected world.”

Hollenbach offers a practical and theological response to the challenge of global migration and forced displacement. His work offers a good description of what religious communities and civil society organizations are doing to respond to the challenge of migration, not only at the U.S. – Mexico border, but throughout the entire country.

Drawing on his long experience with Jesuit Refugee Services (JRS), Hollenbach develops a practical and theological guide for churches to respond to global migration, based on accompaniment, service, and advocacy:

*Accompaniment* “means being with the refugees and the poor on the ground, listening to their stories, showing them in action that they are not forgotten.”<sup>168</sup>

Experience has shown that this not only is important to refugees, but “it has a deep impact on those who are listening, stimulating commitment to take action.”<sup>169</sup> In this way, “accompaniment leads to *service*,”<sup>170</sup> including programs of education for refugee children, or safe havens for women threatened with violence, and service in turn “leads to seeing the need for *advocacy* to change the policies that cause displacement, conflict, and poverty.”<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

#### **6.4 The Catholic Immigrant Prophetic Action Project (IMMPact)**

The pastoral ministry of accompaniment, in the context of global migration and forced displacement, and especially at this moment of history in the United States when immigrant communities and families are increasingly the target of the Trump administration’s policies of mass detention and mass deportation, is a crucial dimension of Catholic Social Teaching and the witness of parishes and dioceses of the Catholic Church.

In December 2025, the Hope Border Institute in El Paso, together with the Center for Migration Studies (CMS) in New York, initiated a new partnership — The Catholic Immigrant Prophetic Action Project (IMMPact)<sup>172</sup> — that aims “to assist the Catholic Church in the U.S. in organizing a robust response on behalf of migrants and refugees in the country, including those with legal status, who are affected by mass deportation efforts ... A key focus of the partnership will be assisting dioceses in organizing events and communications related to migration issues. The partnership will also develop response plans in the event immigration enforcement officers come to sensitive locations like schools, hospitals, or churches.”

On December 11, 2025, the Catholic Diocese of Providence, Rhode Island, in partnership with the Hope Border Institute and the Center for Migration Studies, “brought together faith leaders, diocesan staff, migrant advocates and community leaders from across New England, and from as far as New York and New Jersey, for the first-ever

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<sup>172</sup> <https://www.ncronline.org/news/new-partnership-aims-support-churchs-ministry-migrants-refugees>

‘Witness to Hope: Responding to mass deportations’ regional gathering at the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul.”

According to the *Rhode Island Catholic*, “The day-long event included panels and strategy sessions addressing Catholic teaching on immigration, the current policy landscape, and strategies for responding to mass deportations, including guidance on sensitive locations, communications and accompaniment of affected families.” The convening was co-sponsored by Catholic Charities USA, Catholic Legal Immigration Network, (CLINIC), Catholic Health Association (CHA), and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB).” A second gathering was held in the Diocese of Phoenix March 12, and a third gathering is planned for the Archdiocese of Detroit on May 6, 2026.<sup>173</sup>

This project builds on a vision statement published in 2023 by the Border Observatory of the Hope Border Institute entitled, “A Proposal for a National Catholic Accompaniment System for Asylum Seekers and Paroled Persons,”<sup>174</sup> in which they offered three goals: (1) “Show the need for a national accompaniment system for asylum seekers and other vulnerable migrants,” (2) offer a proposal for the Catholic Church in the United States to integrate the many existing initiatives and efforts into an integral national system of accompaniment to asylum seekers and paroled persons,” and (3) “open a dialogue around a humane and proper welcome of asylum seekers and paroled persons in the U.S.”

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<sup>173</sup> <https://www.detroitcatholic.com/news/witness-to-hope-conference-calls-for-catholic-response-to-mass-deportations>

<sup>174</sup> Hope Border Institute, Border Observatory White Paper 2023: *A Proposal for a National Catholic Accompaniment System for Asylum Seekers and Paroled Persons*.

The rationale for this proposal was to respond to “the lack of a coordinated system of national reception for asylum seekers and paroled persons,” especially considering systematic attacks on migrants and those civil society and church organizations, like Annunciation House in El Paso and the Catholic Diocese of El Paso, that serve them. “U.S. Catholic communities, both in the borderlands and throughout the country, play a major role in accompanying asylum seekers, whether providing them with legal counsel, shelter and housing, healthcare, or simply walking together with people in their struggles, joys, and processes of healing.”

The proposal offered a three-tiered approach to responding to the need to, in the words of Pope Francis, “welcome, protect, promote, and integrate” migrants and refugees into local communities across the United States.<sup>175</sup> Such an approach requires (1) a “functional coordination online platform,” (2) an “effective intra-city and inter-city coordination,” and (3) a “national advocacy campaign,”

Regarding the first pillar of the proposal, “Catholic communities in the U.S. have organized to provide a humane welcome to asylum seekers and paroled persons arriving at the southern border and other cities throughout the country.” One concrete example of this effort is the Migrant Accompaniment Network, an initiative of the Jesuit Refugee Services USA, in partnership with Kino Border Initiative, the Ignatian Solidarity Network, and the Jesuit Community of El Paso.

A second pillar of this proposal is coordination between places of hospitality for migrants and refugees: “The accompaniment of asylum seekers demands strong coordination between places of reception and destination, and within each of these

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<sup>175</sup> Pope Francis, *Message of the 104<sup>th</sup> World Day of Migrants and Refugees*, 2018.

cities.” Models of such coordination already exist, such as the National Pastoral *Migratoria* (NPM), which has helped parishes in four Catholic dioceses “leverage their human and material resources to support already existing grassroots and organizational efforts.”

Finally, a third pillar responds to the need for advocacy around specific issues that are vital to the welcome, protection, promotion, and integration of migrants and refugees in local communities, including “work authorization,” “access to federal, state, and local” benefits and funding, addressing the need to speed up “asylum processing,” and ensuring that asylum seekers know “their rights and the services available to them.”

The Catholic Church in the United States has always prided itself in its immigrant roots, and welcoming, protecting, promoting, and integrating migrants and refugees into local communities and the local church has always been at the heart of its pastoral ministry. “Against this historical backdrop of care and work with and for migrants, we believe now is the moment to advance towards a national coordinated system of accompaniment.”

### **6.5 Season of Faithful Witness: A Pastoral Call to Hope<sup>176</sup>**

Another effort at national coordination of accompaniment of migrants and refugees in the United States is an initiative called “Season of Faithful Witness: A Pastoral Call to Hope.” In January 2026, Jesuit Refugee Services and Catholics from many religious congregations and lay associations, including Pax Christi USA, came together to respond to the Trump administration’s policy of mass detention and mass

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<sup>176</sup> <https://www.catholicsincommunion.org/>

deportation. The need for the Church to offer a visible and effective public witness in defense of the immigrant community became clear, especially in the face of violent assaults by the Border Patrol and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents on immigrants and immigrant communities in Minneapolis, Minnesota, an assault that included the murder of two non-immigrant allies.

The fruit of this concern and these efforts is the “Season of Faithful Witness: A Pastoral Call to Hope.” In the words of the organizers: “Across our country, many families are facing uncertainty and strain. In this moment, Catholics are called to prayer, to seek moral clarity rooted in the Gospel, and to offer faithful public witness grounded in Catholic Social Teaching. We are living in a moment of profound moral consequence for our country and our Church.”

Season of Faithful Witness “invites Catholics across the country to respond to this moment ... [and] (1) engage in prayerful discernment within parishes and communities about what faithful witness looks like in your local context; (2) participate in prayerful and peaceful acts of public witness that are rooted in our Catholic tradition and that affirm human dignity and the sanctity of family life; and (3) cultivate parish social ministries that value a ‘consistent ethic of life,’ promote the common good, and that extend the corporal works of mercy to families and individuals who are most in need. Together, we seek to affirm the essential role of the Catholic faithful in shaping a culture of life and building what the tradition calls a civilization of love.”

According to the Catholics in Communion, a broader Catholic effort that includes Season of Faithful Witness, “This moment calls Catholics to renewed prayer

and faithful witness. In this season, Catholics in Communion is inviting parishes, institutions, and communities across the United States to step forward together in a Season of Faithful Witness,” an effort that began on Ash Wednesday, 2026 and continuing through Corpus Christi, 2026.

## **7. Conclusion: We Are People on Pilgrimage**

This thesis - project argues that migrants, as agents of conscientization, evangelization, and transformation, are key to transforming the Church into a more pastoral and prophetic witness to the Gospel. Border Awareness Encounters, based on intercultural encounter, mutual solidarity, and border hospitality, involving migrants and their families, border organizations, and university and church participants, offer the opportunity for transformative experience leading to a deeper understanding of the global phenomenon and root causes of migration, a deeper experience of our Catholic faith rooted in social justice, cultural diversity, and solidarity with the poor, and a deeper commitment to social justice and the Gospel call to hospitality and welcome to immigrants in our home communities.

I would like to conclude with a personal note. A few years ago, I attended a Mass at the *Casa de Migrante* in Ciudad Juarez to commemorate the World Day for Migrants and Refugees. Several hundred immigrants, mostly women and children, sat in metal chairs outside, enclosed by a barbed wire fence for their protection, under the hot sun, and wearing masks due the COVID pandemic. Those gathered heard words of welcome and celebrated the day together.

I will likely never be a migrant or refugee. Barring some climate disaster, or world war, I will most likely always belong to another world than these migrants and refugees.

Yet I know that I am somehow transformed by my encounter with them. If I am truly open, something happens. I begin to question the world that is familiar to me. I try to see the world from below and from outside – from the perspective of these migrants and refugees. I remember how easy it was for me to cross the Santa Fe bridge and enter their reality, to share the day with them at the *Casa de Migrante* – and how difficult it is for them to cross the same bridge to enter my world. I was accompanied by pastoral workers from the Juarez diocese who collaborated with them, and so I was received not only as a stranger, but as a friend.

Hopefully, I will continue to ask, not only, “Why am I here?” – an important question. But also, “Why are they here, and what is my responsibility toward them?” Hopefully, I will experience empathy leading to solidarity. Hopefully, I will begin to make connections between my security and their vulnerability, between my well-being and their desperate plight. Perhaps I will feel like I live in two different worlds and accept that reality, not as a burden but as an opportunity to experience God’s presence in that intercultural encounter with my migrant and refugee sisters and brothers, and begin to live in that intercultural space between, where the good seeds, the seeds of the Gospel, are planted anew, and hospitality and mutuality and solidarity are some of its fruits.

Truly, we are all, as human beings, people on pilgrimage: sometimes, because we are called by our faith to be on pilgrimage, and sometimes, because we are forced to migrate due to poverty, climate disasters, violence, hunger, in search of refuge and in search of life. Our God is a God of life, but also a God who migrated, who became a

human person in the person of Jesus, who in turn was attentive to the migration of the Spirit that blows where it will, inviting and calling us out of our enclosed reality into a Beloved Community and a beautiful New Creation that is meant to be shared in common by all.

Just as I have experienced many transformations in my life – one of them on account of encountering migrants and refugees at the border and at home in my community – I have seen how Border Awareness Encounter participants have also been transformed, their horizons broadened, their faith deepened, by an intercultural encounter with migrants and refugees, leading to a commitment of mutual solidarity and shared hospitality.

We must continue to go out of our enclosed realities if we want to encounter God, encounter Christ in the migrant, encounter the Spirit in our encounter with our migrant, refugee, and immigrant sisters and brothers. Then we may truly find that we are finally home, and that the new reality we enter is a reality where all are welcome. In doing so, we will create a Beloved Community and a New Creation, where our God – a God of mercy – is welcome, too.

## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Definition of Terms

Accompaniment: A praxis of walking with the poor, living among them, hearing their cry for life, and engaging in a praxis of mutual solidarity to address and transform their reality from one of injustice to one of greater justice. Accompaniment in a setting of intercultural encounter is “mutual”; both sides benefit from the encounter.

Border Awareness Encounter: An immersion experience of church and university groups on the U.S. – Mexico border, involving encounters with migrants and border organizations assisting migrants.

Conscientization: The process by which people and communities develop a critical understanding of their social reality through reflection and action.

Evangelization: The process by which people and communities develop a critical understanding of their faith lived out in a social context and illuminated by the Good News of the Gospel.

Forced Displacement: A root cause of migration, due to poverty, climate change, persecution, and social and political violence, resulting in people leaving their homes and moving to places that provide a measure of economic and political security. When displaced people cross national boundaries, they become refugees.

Hospitality: A response of mutual solidarity that begins in an intercultural encounter with migrants, leads to a deeper understanding of the global phenomenon of migration, and ends with a deeper commitment to provide support and services to migrants, as well as a commitment to address the root causes of forced migration.

Intercultural Encounter: Encounters between people or communities in which there is a deep understanding and respect for all cultures. Intercultural encounter focuses on the mutual exchange of ideas and cultural norms and the development of deep relationships. In an intercultural society no one is left unchanged because everyone learns from one another and grows together (adapted from a definition by the Spring Institute).

Migrant / Refugee: A migrant is “a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons” (UNIOM Migration Factsheet No. 2). A refugee is “someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group” (UNHCR).

Pastoral Circle / Pastoral Spiral: A pastoral method based on a pedagogy of “See / Judge / Act / Celebrate, leading to critical reflection on social reality, illuminated by Scripture and Catholic Social Teaching, and leading to action for social justice. The circle begins and ends with action.

Solidarity: A firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good, i.e., to the good of all and to the good of each person, because we are responsible for all (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 30). Solidarity in a setting of intercultural encounter is “mutual”; both sides benefit from the encounter.

Transformation: The ways in which people and communities develop a critical understanding of faith in action, and how the Gospel calls us to witness in both word and deed.

Welcoming, protecting, promoting, and integrating migrants and refugees: (Pope Francis, *Message for the 104th World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2018*).

## **Appendix 2: Guiding Questions for Intercultural Encounters**

Here are some of the questions that guided our research and narrative interpretation of Border Awareness Encounter participant reflections:

### Questions for Encounters with Migrants

- Root Causes of Migration: Why did you leave?
- Conflicting Narratives: Your hopes? / Asylum reality?
- Migrant Journey: What happened to you on your journey?
- Gospel Call to Solidarity: What does your faith mean to you?
- Gospel Call to Hospitality: What was your experience of detention / welcome?
- Migrant Perspectives on Social Justice Advocacy / What are you seeking?

### Questions for Encounters with Border Organizations and Religious Congregations

- Root Causes of Migration: What have you learned? / What has changed?
- Conflicting Narratives: What do you understand? What needs to be done?
- Intercultural Encounter: How has your encounter with migrants had an impact on your faith?
- Gospel Call to Solidarity: What does our faith require?
- Gospel Call to Radical Hospitality: What will you do in the face of government persecution of immigrants?
- Migrant Perspectives on Social Justice Advocacy: What does the U.S. need to do? What does the Church need to do?

### Questions for Participants of Border Awareness Encounters

- Root Causes of Migration: What did you hear? / What did you learn?
- Conflicting Narratives: What did you understand? / What needs to be done?
- Intercultural Encounter: How has your encounter with migrants had an impact on your faith?
- Gospel Call to Solidarity: What can your church / university do?
- Gospel Call to Hospitality: What have you done or propose to do when you return home?
- Migrant Perspectives on Social Justice Advocacy: What does the U.S. need to do? What does the Church need to do?

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## **5 Global Migration and the Power of Active Nonviolence**

Pax Christi International, Catholic Voices Confronting Violence with the Power of Active Nonviolence, “Migration in the Americas Roundtable 2023,” a contribution to the Vatican Synodal Process,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VtY51aIBRSk>

- 00:00 Marie Dennis, Director, Catholic Nonviolence Initiative, Pax Christi International
- 15:40 Jean Stokan, Justice Coordinator, Sisters of Mercy of the Americas
- 21:10 Scott Wright, Former Director, Columban Mission Center, El Paso
- 25:50 Dr. Ken Butigan, Professor of Peace, Justice & Conflict Studies, DePaul University
- 37:44 Nicolas Paz, Program, Catholic Nonviolence Initiative, Pax Christi International,
- 47:10 Cardinal Alvaro Ramazzini, Guatemala
- 57:00 Fr. Ishmael Moreno, SJ, Honduras
- 1:02:12 Carlos Marentes, director, Farmworker Center, El Paso
- 1:14:06 Karla, Diocese of San Paolo, Brazil
- 1:27:04 Dr. Leo Guardado, Professor of Theology, Fordham University
- 1:33:16 Sr. Christa Parra, Shelter Coordinator, Ciudad Juarez, Mexico

1:38:06 Heidi Cerneka, Staff Attorney, Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy  
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## **6 Qualitative Research and Practical Theology**

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## Vita

Scott Wright was born in 1950 in Lincoln, Nebraska. He obtained his bachelor's degree in religious studies from Duke University in 1972, his Master of Arts degree in Theology and Master of Divinity degree from the Washington Theological Union (WTU) in Washington D.C. in 1998. He also pursued graduate studies at the Catholic University of America and was a doctoral candidate in historical and systematic theology from 2010 – 2015, and partially completed his dissertation on the theology of Jon Sobrino.

He worked as a lay missionary for CARITAS in the United Nations refugee camps along the Salvadoran – Honduran border from 1981 – 1983, and with pastoral teams of accompaniment for the Archdiocese of San Salvador during the civil war from 1983 – 1990. From 1991 – 2009 he served as the Coordinator of the Ecumenical Program in Central America and the Caribbean (EPICA); and from 2009 – 2013 as the Advocacy Coordinator with survivors of torture at the Torture Abolition and Survivor Support Coalition (TASSC).

From 2013 – 2022 he worked for the Missionary Society of St. Columban as the Director of the St. Columban Justice, Peace, and Ecology Office in Washington DC, and from 2021 – 2022 as the Director of the Columban Mission Center in El Paso, Texas.

He is currently an Ignatian Volunteer at Pax Christi USA, a national Catholic movement for peace and nonviolence. In 2022 he was named an Ambassador of Peace for Pax Christi USA, along with his wife Jean Stokan, and many others.

He lives in Mount Rainier, Maryland with his wife Jean Stokan, daughter Maura and son-in-law Leonardo, and their daughter and our granddaughter Clara Rose.

