

A visit to the border with the New Sanctuary Coalition

In Tijuana, we witnessed the resilience and humanity of the migrant movement.

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The U.S.-Mexico border. Thinkstock.

All the election-season fearmongering about the Central American caravan put the Tijuana-San Diego border on my year-end itinerary. On a trip organized by the [New Sanctuary Coalition](#), seven of us had an opportunity to practice the presence of God—and to draw attention to the irreducible spark of divinity that exists within migrants seeking asylum.

[More than 5,600 migrants had taken shelter in Tijuana's Benito Juarez Sports Complex](#) (which has since our visit [been closed](#)). Processing was limited, purposefully, to 40–100 people a day. The outdoor stadium was heavily policed, with long lines awaiting limited rations of food and water. In the moderate heat of a

November day, mothers nursed their infants and the elderly sought shelter under tenuous tents. Children used the curves and cracks in the street to guide their ball games—a sight similar to street games just miles away in San Diego or times zones away in Harlem.

Our group navigated the customs process after observing the American soldiers, the intimidating air power, and the barbed wire. [The Trump administration spent more than \\$70 million to deploy nearly 6,000 active-duty troops to the southern border of the U.S.](#)

En route to the tent city of refugees, we walked the footbridge over the Tijuana River. The river, teeming with refuse, is where migrants were forced to wade two days earlier to evade tear gas. President Trump imposed a temporary closure of the San Ysidro crossing into San Diego—the busiest port of entry in the Western hemisphere—after [nearly 500 migrants](#) collectively demanded that the U.S. honor its own laws around asylum.

The U.S. government continues to separate Central American families at this legal port of entry by barring men who can't prove their familial ties with the women and children they are with. In addition, the overall number of detained migrant children [has reached 14,000](#), most of whom came by themselves.

We were able to witness the resilience and immeasurable humanity of this migrant movement. We were the first NSC cohort to visit the southern border; the group plans to organize more faith leaders to travel to Tijuana to help with asylum claims, accompany unaccompanied minors through the port of entry, and help connect asylum seekers with local resources.

Nicole Ramos of [Al Otro Lado—a binational direct legal services organization serving indigent deportees, migrants, and refugees in Tijuana](#)—enlightened us about the daily hazards and treatment people face. Pregnant mothers and people with chronic illness are being denied care. Migrants are working at private prisons for a dollar a day.

At the stadium, we also received a list from the migrants' well-organized but decentralized leaders. They are calling for (in my words):

1. The end of the arbitrary and manipulative deportations—framed as voluntary deportations—that are happening in Mexico

2. A more expedited process to make a claim for and receive asylum in the U.S. or Mexico
3. The names of people who have already been deported, to help give an account of missing persons concerns.
4. Policies and procedures that actively honor the human rights of the migrants and protect them from the violence of the military and local police.

Back on “our side” of the border, Americans continue to feed debates about whether the migrants’ claims about their own experience are legitimate, and whether they deserve any help. But the situation at the border—the militarization, the ongoing separation of families—exposes the fraudulence of American innocence concerning the disinheritance of nonwhite people. It compromises the moral fiber of our nation.

White people have historically benefited from “a witness protection program,” [writes Robin DiAngelo](#), “that guards their identities and absolves them of their crimes while offering them a future free of past encumbrances and sins.” The administration’s antagonistic approach to these asylum-seekers, and the nation’s muteness regarding it, point to this history of political absolution. Democracy is not safe—none of us is safe—as long as the ruling classes can criminalize entire groups of people with the stroke of a pen or a [stream of presidential tweets](#).

“We are not numbers on a case,” one Honduran man in his 60s told me. “We are persons, humans with rights. We have differences, but there is one God and one people. It’s our country today, but it could be any country tomorrow.”

At the stadium, we also met [Gavin Rogers](#), a San Antonio pastor who sojourned many weeks with the caravan, trekking with them from Mexico City to Tijuana. He remarked, “I expected to hear stories of rape and violence. I did not expect to be on top of an 18-wheeler and have a stranger wrap her legs around me for hours to make sure I didn’t fall off. They became family while I was on the caravan.”

So many politicians and so many churchgoers have sacrificed their faith on the altar of “America first,” with its undertones of “whites only.” The crisis at the border challenges us to engage the larger struggle for our national identity—the perpetual conflict between the America of justice, freedom, and opportunity and the America of exclusion, hate, and displacement. People who are pained by the mistreatment of migrants cannot let their voices be muted, allowing child-snatchers, parent-deporters, and asylum-deniers to misconceive their unjust actions as somehow

patriotic and fair. The silence of people committed to a moral universe bent toward justice is sinful and shameful, and God sees it.

A radical commitment to love and justice wards off the normalization of indifference. The moral health of the U.S. depends on its citizens using our voices—our privilege, our influence, our power—to diagnose the social pathologies of bigotry that enable the systemic rejection of asylum-seekers. When we see this sort of pain and say nothing, our very humanity folds—and democracy moves toward death.