

Convicted for taking water to thirsty people

The No More Deaths volunteers were imitating the logic of the incarnation.

From the Editors in the [February 27, 2019](#) issue



[No More Deaths](#) volunteers taking jugs of water into the desert for migrants near Tucson, Arizona. Photo by Carrot Quinn.

For more than a decade, members of the interfaith humanitarian group No More Deaths have been placing food, clothing, and jugs of water in the Sonoran Desert to aid migrants who have crossed into Arizona from Mexico. Their goal is simple: to prevent migrants from dying in the desert. Between 1999 and 2018, more than 3,000 migrants perished while trying to make the dangerous crossing

During the summer of 2017, as temperatures reached triple digits, Natalie Hoffman, Oona Holcomb, Madeline Huse, and Zaachila Orozco-McCormick drove into the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge, part of the vast desert wilderness along the border, and left behind jugs of water and canned food for migrants. The four women, all volunteers with No More Deaths, were followed by a U.S. Border Patrol officer, arrested, and charged with entering the wildlife refuge without a permit and with “abandonment of property.” According to court records, the women said their actions were motivated by their religious convictions and their belief that everyone should have access to means of survival.

In the Bible, giving water to all those who thirst is a sign of God’s compassion. “Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters,” declares the prophet Isaiah, describing the invitation of God. In the Gospel of Matthew, giving water to the thirsty is one of Jesus’ commands to his disciples, and it is an explicit way of serving Jesus himself. The volunteers for No More Deaths were not only following Jesus’ directive. By making their own risky journey into the desert, they were imitating the logic of the incarnation: in Jesus, God seeks out those who are thirsty and in need.

Last month Hoffman, Holcomb, Huse, and Orozco were convicted. They face up to six months in prison. In issuing his verdict, Judge Bernardo Velasco said that the four women knowingly broke the law. “The defendants did not get an access permit, they did not remain on the designated roads, and they left water, food, and crates in the refuge,” Velasco wrote. “All of this, in addition to violating the law, erodes the national decision to maintain the refuge in its pristine nature.”

In the coming months, five more No More Deaths volunteers will go on trial for similar activities. Although No More Deaths had been operating in the area for several years, their arrests came after the group published a video online of a Border Patrol agent dumping water left for migrants onto the ground. The group sensed the arrests were in retaliation. A Border Patrol spokesperson says that the group was not targeted and that the agency is merely enforcing the law.

The volunteers of No More Deaths may have broken the law. But the arrests and convictions are signs of a border policy that seems more interested in punishment than in rationally addressing human need, and more concerned with criminalizing generous humane acts than resolving long-standing, deadly problems.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “In search of the thirsty.”

