

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly at the U.S.-Mexico Border by Rosemarie Pace

It is said if you really want to understand a situation or people you need to encounter it in person, and so I did. From January 18th to the 25th, 2023, I joined a group of 10 people from across the U.S. on an Immersion Trip to El Paso, Texas and Juarez, Mexico hosted by the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers. The trip was organized in collaboration with the Encuentro Project which describes its mission as “rooted in the tradition of Faith that does Justice, offers participants a faith-based, multi-faceted immersion program in the El Paso-Ciudad Juarez border region to experience a deeper understanding of the complex migration reality and of this community.” It does so “by providing education, service, activities, reflection, prayer and community.” Other collaborators include the Marist Brothers and the Columban Fathers.



Columban Mission Center

It was the Columban Mission Center in El Paso that became our home for the week. The Center is a large house that is an experiment in eco-friendly living. This meant no heat other than space heaters and extreme water conservation.

Should you think no heat wouldn't be a problem in Texas even in January, like me, you'd be wrong. The average temperature in El Paso in January ranges from the 30s to the 50s because of its altitude of 3730' above sea level. In fact, there were mornings when the temperature was below the freezing point. In short, it was cold!

As for the water, in a first-night orientation, we were instructed on house rules for water usage: Consider not taking daily showers. When you do shower, since it takes a while for the water to warm up, use a bucket to catch the water and then flush the toilet with the collected water or pour it on the plants outside. Also consider the adage about flushing toilets: If it's yellow, let it mellow; if it's brown, flush it down. When you wash the dishes—yes, we were in charge of our own housekeeping—first scrape the dishes into a pail for non-compostable garbage, then put the dishes in a basin for pre-wash. Next move them to another basin to wash. Rinse them in a third basin. Finally, put them in a fourth basin to bleach them. There was even a formula for the ratio of bleach to water. Compostable garbage was put in its own container.

Debbie Northern, a Maryknoll Lay Missioner, provided us with lots of choices for breakfast and brought in catered suppers from a local restaurant. They were quite delicious. Generally, we ate out for lunch depending on where we were each day.

While the two couples who were with us had their own rooms, the rest of us slept dormitory style, one room for the three remaining men and another for the three remaining women. Fortunately there were several bathrooms in addition to a spacious meeting room, a small chapel for morning prayer, and a dining area that lent itself to community building.

Besides respecting the natural environment, these accommodations were intentionally designed to be in solidarity in some small way with the migrants and others we were to meet over the course of our immersion experience.

So what was that experience?

As mentioned, our first night we gathered in the meeting room for an orientation, but also introductions and a presentation. One of the staff informed us of the three-step process we were about to enter. In question form, it asks: “What? So what? Now what?” Another way of putting it is “See. Judge. Act.”

Sr. Christa Parra of **Casa Eudes** was our first speaker. Casa Eudes is a shelter in Juarez that follows the call of Pope Francis to welcome, protect, promote, and integrate. It is run by the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd and serves displaced women who have been victims of violence and their young children. The women may come from numerous countries, including Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Venezuela, Brazil, Mexico, Cuba, Haiti, Turkey, Ukraine and Russia, though the latter two are few in number in comparison to the others. Most are hoping to move on to the U.S. Their stay at Casa Eudes is short-term. These are women who have suffered much. Some have been raped. Loved ones may have been ransomed or killed. Poverty and climate change may have played a part in the violence they are escaping. Nevertheless, they maintain great faith, believing that God or Jesus comes first and will provide. They become community while at the shelter, celebrating birthdays, planning baby showers, and recognizing other special occasions with joy and generosity. Sr. Christa spoke of these women with great affection and admiration. With some humor and humility, she also claimed to be in solidarity with them, sharing COVID and lice(!), but admitting that in the end she can still go home where she enjoys resources that refugees and asylum seekers simply don't have. Learn even more about Casa Eudes at https://bettercarenetwork.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/case_sudy_juarez_v2_english.pdf.

The next day was our first full day, which we spent in **Ciudad Juarez**. We traveled in a van that Denny Holley, our fearless leader, drove over smooth highways and some very rough terrain. Crossing the border into Mexico was effortless. It's something thousands do daily. Returning to the U.S. is another matter.

Our first stop was **Proyecto Santo Niño** in the neighborhood of Anapra. Sr. Carol Wirtz, SC was our host. She is a U.S. American who has been serving in Juarez for decades. She is a neuro-therapist who shared a bit about her own journey to this place and this work before telling us about Proyecto Santo Niño which is a facility providing health, maternal, and child care as well as early childhood education, especially for disabled children. All told the facility serves 40 to 50 children. The education practice they are following is Montessori. We got to tour the building, hear from some of the



mothers helping out there, see a small group of children at class and a couple of others receiving therapy. The smiles on the faces spoke volumes of what a gift this center is to the mothers and their children, and the dedication of the workers was inspiring. Visit <http://proyectosantonino.org/home> for more.

Next we visited **Corpus Christi parish** where Fr. Bill Morton is pastor. He is the Columban missionary who founded the Columban Mission Center where we were staying. Fr. Morton spoke about the struggles of the people of his parish and referred to the authorities as inefficient and corrupt. He is able to help in the many ways he does—providing food, clothing, shelter, work, legal and medical assistance to migrants both heading to the U.S. and deported by the U.S.—through the generosity of donors, but he noted that some parishioners are resentful, don't help, and display racism against some people, for example the Haitians. He did say the Catholics are more likely to offer assistance than the Evangelicals. While I was impressed by Fr. Morton's work, I felt a degree of sadness at this stop. Read more



from Fr. Morton himself at this website: <https://columban.org/newsletter/25-years-mission-border>.

Our third stop was **Biblioteca: Libros de la Vida**, a lovely small library founded by two amazing women to serve their struggling community, especially the youth. The library is in a simple ranch house filled with books in Spanish and English for all ages, a comfortable sitting area, and a kitchen/dining space where we enjoyed a delicious lunch. The library offers after-school programs and even scholarships made possible through the generosity of Catholic parishes in Kansas City back in the U.S. Those scholarships are a Godsend, encouraging education and a way to escape the pressure from cartels to make money at the risk of life and limb.



Our final visit in Juarez was to **Mercy Sister Betty Campbell**, another U.S. American who has been serving in Juarez since 1995. Finding her home was an adventure unto itself, but it was a blessing that, eventually, we found her because she is a fountain of knowledge, compassion, faith and trust in a provident God. Sr. Betty is a retired nurse who has ministered to those in need from Washington, DC to South America to Central America and, finally, at the border. Along the way she said she learned not so much to do *for* as to do *with*. Since then her primary approach has been accompaniment.

It was in September 1995 that Sr. Betty, along with Carmelite Peter Hinde and layman Tadeo Zywicki, opened **Casa Tabor** to accompany the local people and try to understand the effects of the maquilas whose factories are a tremendous cause of the poverty that plagues the people. Sr. Betty explained that factories which pay \$12/hour in the U.S. pay \$1.41/hour in Mexico. Another cause for the poverty, she added, are U.S. corporate investment loans that create endless debt and

lead some young people into the hands of cartels, coyotes, and drug dealers. These criminals offer desperate youth \$500 for each migrant they can get across the border. Tragically, violence is yet another part of this story. As Sr. Betty described it, the violence has advanced from stones to guns coming across the border from the U.S.

On a more positive note, Sr. Betty told us how an evil gave birth to something very good. Shortly after settling in Juarez, she accompanied a battered wife. A neighbor woman asked if there was space in Casa Tabor where women could meet and discuss their problems. Thus began another piece of Sr. Betty's ministry. She began to facilitate workshops for the women and to listen and learn from them. One thing she learned was the need for scholarships. This need exists because education in Mexico is not free. While the government provides the building, it does not provide books, supplies, uniforms, or even the teachers. Through the generosity of sisters and other "ordinary people" in the U.S., Sr. Betty now provides education scholarships of \$150 to four students each semester, processed by the Diocesan office for scholarships.

Besides making her home a center of accompaniment for service, listening, and learning, Sr. Betty shares it with guests and volunteers who stay for varying lengths of time, and, in her backyard, she maintains a memorial wall that she refers to as her "arboretum". Above the



entrance it says in Spanish "In Memory of the Truth, Justice, Peace, Love." On the back wall hang separate large sheets of paper that contain the names of 303 journalists killed in Mexico between 1993 and 2022; 63 priests killed between 1990 and 2022; 2,361 women killed in Juarez alone between 2017 and 2022; 21,558 men killed in Juarez in the same time period; around 102,000 people disappeared in Mexico between 2007 and 2022; and around 3,000 migrants who died in the U.S. desert between 2005 and 2021. We were invited to take a slip of paper from one of a few jars Sr. Betty had labeled with these different categories of people. On the paper was the name of yet another casualty, his or her age, status (killed, disappeared, migrant, etc.), and a corresponding date. We then formed a circle and prayed for each person and added that name to the appropriate sheet of paper. It was a very moving and reverent ritual.

Our day ended, we returned to El Paso, passing through customs. All our passports were checked, we were asked a few questions, and allowed to proceed. Back at the Mission Center, we gathered for prayer, supper, and a time to debrief. Brother Todd from the Encuentro Project asked us to share a "consolation" and a "desolation," a high and a low, a place where we saw God. Our answers varied, but also overlapped. Despite some very sad sights and stories, Br. Todd Patenaude ended the session with a reminder, "There is no peace and justice without joy!" In fact, we did see joy in many of the people we met throughout the day.

The remainder of our trip was exclusively in El Paso, though the two cities on two sides of the border are more like one in many ways—culturally, architecturally, linguistically (80-85% of the residents of El Paso speak Spanish) and more.

We began our first full day in El Paso at **Doniphan Park facing the border fence**. Three Border Patrol agents met us and one took the lead in explaining some of the intensely complicated policies and practices of U.S. border control. From this point forward, I apologize in advance for any confusion in my reporting. The more I heard, the more I felt as if I needed a law degree solely in immigration law to make head or tail out of the complexity of the totally dysfunctional U.S. immigration system, if there even is a system at all.

As I understood it and recorded it in my notes, there are three branches of which Border Patrol (BP) is one. The other two are Field and Air and Sea patrols. What they are *not* are ICE or TSA. The purposes of BP are protection of the border and rescue, not recovery. If people crossing the border express fear of danger from where they are coming, BP refers them to another entity to process them; BP does not take care of the people directly. Nevertheless, they do have posts where people can get emergency health care paid for with U.S. tax dollars. This BP agent spoke with a sincere tone of compassion. He blamed traffickers, smugglers, and gun and drug runners for the bulk of the problem, along with intentional misinformation and a pack of false promises. He also noted that the rules change constantly and frequently, making the job even more challenging. Consequently, they are understaffed, very stressed, and suffering from a high attrition rate.

After listening to this presentation, we walked right up to the fence which at this point is a heavy metal mesh. The fence differs at different locations at least in part simply because of being constructed at different times. Beyond the fence is a man-made creek with relatively fast-moving current. We were assured it is not a moat, but rather a source of other hydro services for the community. Beyond the creek is the Rio Grande, which is anything but grand at this point. The river is the actual international border. Once people have crossed it, they are in the U.S., even before they reach the fence. According to international law, this should mean they are entitled to request asylum, but the U.S. has been defying international law for years.



While we were listening to the BP agent, we actually saw a small group of people changing from wet to dry clothes on the U.S. side of the river. Once they had changed, they headed west toward a port of entry where they would present themselves. We do not know what happened after that though I would have loved to have been able to follow them to see.

From Doniphan Park we proceeded to **Sacred Heart Church**, where many migrants find shelter, food, and assistance. In one of the classrooms inside the parish house, Fr. Rafael Garcia, S.J., the

pastor of the church, welcomed us and introduced us to **David Dorado Romo**, a microhistorian who has been studying the history of migration at the El Paso border for many years. Mr. Romo began his slide show presentation back in 1914 when, just as today, many migrants landed at Ft. Bliss. One difference from today, however: They were not labeled “illegal.” Before 1917, only the Chinese were considered illegal aliens. The transition to abusive treatment here came with fear (or an excuse of fear) of typhus. This led to practices of fumigation, sterilization, expulsion or deportation, and an application of eugenics. Mr. Romo recommended two videos to get a fuller sense of the horrors happening in this racist time in the early 20th century and to put today’s policies in a historical context: *The Dark History of Gasoline Vats at the Border* and *A Night at the Garden*. You might also be interested in his book, *Ringside Seat to a Revolution: An Underground Cultural History of El Paso and Juarez, 1893-1923*.

After lunch, we returned to Sacred Heart where **Fr. Garcia**, himself, addressed us. His talk was on Catholic Social Teaching, emphasizing what it has to say about immigration. Using PowerPoint, he grounded his talk in both Hebrew and Christian scripture. In Hebrew scripture, he presented repeated variations of this passage, “You shall not oppress a stranger nor torment him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” In Christian scripture, he cited the Magnificat, the Corporal Works of Mercy, the parable of the Good Samaritan, St. James’s point that we need both faith and works, and so much more. Fr. Garcia also reiterated what we had heard on our first night about the importance of “See, Judge (evaluate), Act. Ultimately, Catholic Social Teaching recognizes a nation’s right to regulate its borders and control immigration, but it also insists on the right of people to migrate, and it emphasizes the priority of the common good, justice, and mercy for all people regardless of legal status and not just national citizens.



Day 3 (our third full day, second in El Paso): This day began quite early as we were headed to **Mount Cristo Rey** (elevation 4,675’) where we would climb the 2.5 mile-long spiraling path to the peak. There, a statue of Christ the King, technically in New Mexico, overlooks the cities of both El Paso and Juarez. Along the way, we would pray the Stations of the Cross focusing on the plight of migrants, prepared by Catholic Relief Services and modified by Br. Todd. It was a very contemplative hike with an interesting history. Read about it at <http://www.mtcristorey.com/>.

The rest of the day was focused on preparing a meal at **Holy Family Shelter**. Fortunately, Papa Joe Coppolla, one of our group, had experience cooking for up to 100 people, so we happily put him in charge of the menu, the shopping, and the kitchen. Others stepped in to help cooking, and some of us humbly took to setting up, serving, and cleaning up.



There were 50 to 60 migrants to serve this evening. Some were families, but most seemed to be single. Many came from Venezuela. At least one woman was from Cuba. Michael Costello, one of the long-term volunteers, invited me to help process one of the migrants. I was happy to get the first-hand experience. The young man whose papers I was handed came from Venezuela and was headed to a compadre in Akron, OH. All the people at this short-term shelter are supposed to have sponsors and a destination somewhere in the U.S. “My” young man, whom I’ll call Luis, had some official papers with his name and birthdate, his destination address and phone number on it. There was also a code to indicate that he was traveling alone. I was to transfer information to a form for Holy Family: his name, age, destination, and any health concerns, as well as the name, address, phone number, and relationship of his sponsor. Then, using a Holy Family cell phone, I was to call the sponsor to verify the information and get transportation information. In this case, I reached the compadre, but he didn’t speak English, and my Spanish is *very* limited. (I’d been using Google Translate with only modest success to speak to Luis.) I gave the phone over to Luis whose compadre told him he was at work and needed to get back to him. The compadre did not yet have a ticket for Luis, nor did he think there was a bus Luis could take to Akron. Luis wasn’t convinced. At that point, I got some help from Br. Lalo on staff at the shelter. Br. Lalo took Luis to a bulletin board with phone numbers for three different bus services, as well as the airport. Luis needed something for his phone to make the calls. Br. Lalo directed him to where he could get what he needed. There was yet another form to complete for Holy Family which included the name of the migrant and the interviewer (me), the destination, means of travel, and schedule for departure. Br. Lalo showed me where they post that form by migrant name and schedule. It was all very orderly and compassionately handled, but Luis looked very worried, and I wished I had better Spanish to console him.

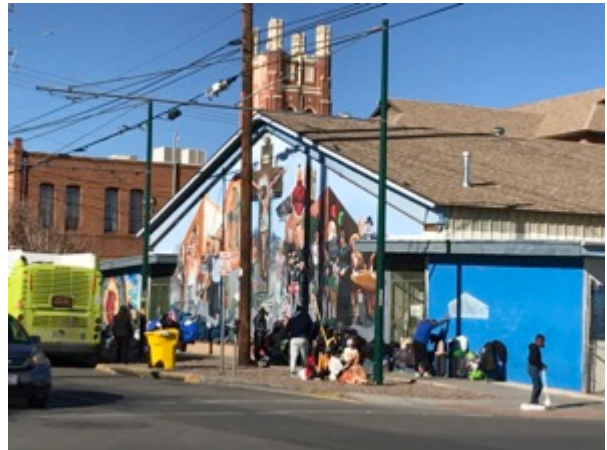
Because I was so new to this, I only got to help Luis before it was time to serve dinner. Br. Lalo drew everyone to tables, spoke to them in Spanish, and then introduced the words to what became a sung prayer before eating. Everyone joined in and looked so very happy. The people ate with gusto and tremendous appreciation. It was a very heart-warming experience, though I still felt bad for Luis.



Side Altar to Our Lady of Guadalupe in Sacred Heart Church

Day 4, Sunday: Before heading to Sacred Heart for a beautiful bi-lingual Mass, **Sr. Deirdre Griffin, SSJ**, a Maryknoll Lay Missioner and an attorney working at **Las Americas**, came to the Columban Mission Center to give us some insight into the legal quagmire that is U.S. immigration law. Las Americas is an immigrant advocacy center founded in 1987 to serve “the legal needs of low income immigrants, including refugees and asylum seekers, victims of crime, and families seeking reunification” <https://las-americas.org/en/home>. Sr. Deirdre is one of several professionals lending her expertise to the numerous clients seeking their aid. Fortunately, Sr. Deirdre provided us with a handout to accompany what she told us in her too-short time with us. As already noted, the complexity of the situation is mind-boggling. Following are some key points from her presentation:

- Currently there are 90 million displaced people globally.
- They are “triple traumatized”: where they’re from, along the journey, and when they arrive.
- In the U.S., they may be categorized as immigrants, i.e. those whose intent is to remain in the U.S. long term as legal permanent residents and/or citizens; non-immigrant whose intent is to come to the U.S. for a defined period of time for a specific purpose like business, study, or vacation; or quasi-immigrant, i.e. those allowed in the U.S. without formal status without penalty, e.g. those with humanitarian parole such as coming to care for a sick parent who has no other help, deferred action for childhood arrivals (DACA), or temporary protected status (TPS).



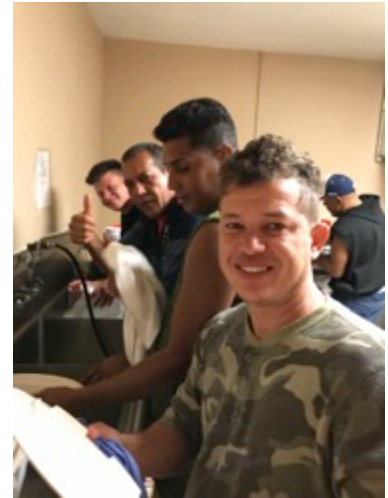
The Shelter at Sacred Heart Church

- Refugees seek protection through the UN or a country other than the U.S. Asylum seekers seek protection from inside the U.S. Asylum is intended for extreme cases. Either way, refugees or asylum seekers must have experienced or have well-founded fear of persecution based on any of five criteria: race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group, e.g. gender or sexual orientation. Neither economic distress nor climate change, among other crises, qualifies for refugee or asylum status.
- People’s status may change during the long period of processing, but this can risk losing one status before another is established.
- Depending on status, either the State Department or the US Citizen and Immigration Services, Secretary of State or Secretary of Justice, has jurisdiction over a particular migrant’s case.
- Processes for family-based petitions are backlogged for many years, as many as decades.
- Title 42, meant to restrict admission to the country because of public health concerns, is being used to prevent anyone, regardless of health, from entering the U.S.
- Technically, it is not a crime to cross the border, but states can criminalize doing so by calling it trespassing or some other claim.
- Billions of dollars are invested in this inhumane situation profiting the few, like big tech, while harming the many.

Jumping ahead for a moment, Sr. Deirdre returned to us the following night since her initial time with us was necessarily cut short. This time, as hesitant as she was to prescribe any solutions to the problem, she did emphasize the value of education of U.S. citizens and the likely benefit of economic conversion from detention and deportation to welcome and support.

Returning to Day 4, after Mass we met with another attorney, **Fr. Michael Gallagher, S.J.** who gave us a look into **“International Migration: People Who Cross Borders, Are They a Threat?”** Fr. Gallagher pointed out that there are all kinds of borders, and people are crossing

them across the globe. In fact, the number of people who crossed international borders between 2018 and 2019 exceeded the populations of China and India! Fr. Gallagher grouped migrants in two categories, those who leave for dire reasons and those Sr. Deirdre would have described as non-immigrants. In the former group, he included those who are actually the majority, internally displaced; refugees; and the smallest number, asylum seekers. He also provided statistical evidence that low and middle-income nations are hosting far more forcibly displaced persons (FDPs) than wealthy ones. Generally these people are settled in remote or less desirable parts of a host country, often near the border. The UNHCR, which is meant to help FDPs, is sorely underfunded, resulting in refugees being underfed, under educated, and unemployed. The U.S. is actually not doing its share in comparison to many other smaller and poorer countries. We have the room and the resources, according to Fr. Gallagher who also disputed the complaints of opponents that migrants are criminals, bring disease, and take our jobs. Rather, he suggested we visit the jails and see who is occupying them. The percentage of migrants is miniscule compared to U.S. citizens. In short, Fr. Gallagher would argue that people who cross borders are *not* a threat.



Helping with the Dishes at Holy Family Shelter (hardly a threat!)

After Fr. Gallagher, we had our third encounter with an attorney. **Alma Rosa Nieto** works with **Diocesan Migrant and Refugee Services (DMRS)**. “DMRS is [a] full-service immigration legal aid clinic serving low-income immigrants and refugees residing in the southwestern United States. [It is] a ministry of the Catholic Diocese of El Paso....” Learn more at (<https://www.elpasodiocese.org/diocesan-migrant--refugee-services.html>).

Ms. Nieto titled her presentation, “**Wait Your Turn and Come Lawfully’ (in 30 Years),”** a comment we have all probably heard many times. Her 32-page handout is just a taste of why that phrase is so out of touch with reality. Filled with articles, tables, and charts, it tries to explain the nearly inexplicable. For example, listening to Ms. Nieto’s presentation and reading her handout, we learned that there are many different types of visas available to migrants, each with its own quota and varying lengths of time that a migrant might have to wait simply to get one. In the interim of waiting, a migrant’s status might change, which could change the visa for which s/he is eligible. We also learned of the seemingly infinite number of variables that affect a migrant’s chance of being accepted into or deported from this country. Such variables include the reason for seeking refuge or asylum; the country from which s/he is coming; the age of the person entering the U.S.; whether s/he has a relative here; what the relationship is; the age and legal status of the relative; how long the migrant or relative has already been in the U.S.; any criminal record and how long ago the crime was committed (a crime could be as simple as a traffic violation); if the migrant has been abused by a U.S. citizen or legal permanent resident, was a victim of a crime while in the U.S., or was trafficked into the U.S.; and on and on. It also matters where the migrant goes to court. The rate of grants for asylum ranged from 0% to 85% in 2017, depending on where the case was heard. Far more migrants receive asylum in New York City, for example, than in El Paso, though Ms. Nieto agreed with our other speakers that El Paso is a very welcoming city. It is not the citizens of El Paso who are deciding cases, however, but the

government officials. Another problem in this already unmanageable system is language, not just English versus any other language, but different meanings for the same words. Example: A notary and an attorney are the same in Spanish, but not in English. Misinformation is all too easy to occur. Some of what Ms. Nieto shared with us reiterated what others had also told us about Title 42, about the right to asylum once at the border fence which is inside the U.S., and about how profitable all this is for certain entities like detention centers. Ultimately, Ms. Nieto urged immigration reform, stating that the last such reform was amnesty granted during President Reagan's presidency.

This was a very intense day filled with much of the "bad and the ugly," but, thankfully, we ended with some "good," returning to Holy Family shelter for another meal with the spirited migrants who once again appreciated the food our group prepared and served. Four of the guys even stepped up to do the dishes and posed for a photo, smiling all the way, including Luis who had looked so stressed only the day before.

The Final Day began Monday morning at 8:30 AM, not my time of day, and not **Kim Schaefer's** either. Ms. Schaefer, an architect and Project Director at Abara House (<https://www.abara.org/>), came to Columban Mission Center to talk to us about "**Climate Change, Migration, and You.**" Apologizing for not being at her best in terms of the early morning hour, she proved to be top of her game in terms of her message. She began by asking us what climate change is and then elaborating. She explained that it is the result of burning fossil fuels which form a blanket of CO₂ that raises sea levels and causes extreme weather events, such as storms, floods, and droughts. She attributed the excesses of fossil fuel pollution to both poverty and affluence, among other causes. The poor tend to rely on coal and wood for fuel. Both deforestation and desertification result (though these are not the only causes of those two environmental disasters). The rich tend to populate a throwaway culture that wastes substantial amounts of food, electricity, water, and other vital resources. While the rich are more responsible for climate change, it is the poor who suffer the most. Farms are lost and food prices rise, forcing many to migrate from rural to urban areas becoming climate refugees. What we need to address this unjust situation is intentional, sustainable thinking. We need to remember that matter cannot be created or destroyed; everything goes somewhere. We must optimize systems, doing more with less. We must end the greed and unequal distribution of resources. We must be more mindful of what both scripture and Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* teach: The Earth is our Common Home, and we must care for it for the benefit of all.



La Mujer Obrera

After Ms. Schaefer's sobering presentation, we drove to **La Mujer Obrera** (Woman Work), where **Cemelli de Aztlan** told us the story of this remarkable place and where we enjoyed a delicious lunch and did a little fair-trade shopping. La Mujer Obrera (<http://www.mujerobrera.org/>) is in the poorest neighborhood in El Paso known as Chamizal, but it is exceptionally rich in history, culture, and service. Over its 40 years of existence, it has empowered women to take charge of their

lives and their community. Drawing on the indigenous Mexican heritage of their elders, these women have developed several enterprises, including Café Mayapan which serves all natural, healthful food from their own community farm; a farmers market; Lum Matik (Mother Earth), a fair-trade import company selling beautiful handiwork from several women's cooperatives in Mexico; a daycare and learning center that is not only affordable, but #1 in quality in the area; and Museo Mayachen that teaches the local history. Although older than NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement, La Mujer Obrera is a tribute to the resourcefulness of the women who were severely affected when it went into effect. Prior to NAFTA, many women were garment workers who were able to take care of their families, provide an education for themselves and their children, and generally live relatively comfortable lives. When NAFTA came along, 35,000 jobs were lost because factories closed and moved across the border. Today, La Mujer Obrera has turned these women into community organizers, fighting the presence of trucks near their schools polluting the air and threatening their children's health and safety, opposing school closures, and demanding a school curriculum that recognizes their identity. It was a joy to visit this place made even more beautiful by the magnificent murals by Lorenzo Guel that reflect Mayan culture and cover many walls inside and out.

From La Mujer Obrera, we traveled to Loretto Academy where the convent houses **Centro Santa Catalina**, another fair-trade shopping opportunity. Again all the products come from Mexican women artisans and are beautiful, colorful, varied, and reasonable in price. Check them out here: <https://centrodesantacatalina.org/products/>.

Our final lecture brought us back to Sacred Heart parish house. **Michael DeBruhl**, a former Border Patrol agent, current director of the Sacred Heart Shelter, and an El Paso native, was the main speaker, but he also invited Efren Loya, a DACA recipient, to share his story. Efren directs Religious Education at Sacred Heart.

Mr. DeBruhl began the session, telling us some of his personal history, which included time in the military and in civilian jobs nationally and internationally. His work as a Border Patrol Agent lasted 26 years. He went on to review some of the history of the southern border from the 19th century—when the U.S. purchased land from Mexico to create the current border—to today. Initially, entities like the Army and the Texas Rangers provided border checks, but in 1924 Border Patrol was established. In 1942, the Bracero Program, a Mexican labor agreement with the U.S., came into being and lasted for several decades. Between the 1970s and 80s, the Mexican peso crashed, increasing migration. Subsequently, in 1986, President Reagan signed the Immigration Reform and Control Act, which enabled people to gain permanent residence. By 2021 most people coming across the southern border were no longer Mexican, but from Central America, which brings us to the current situation.



Mr. DeBruhl reiterated the list of qualifiers for asylum: race, religion, nationality, political opinion, and social class, but NOT economic status. He spoke a fair amount about Title 42, meant to address health condition, but being used to keep people out of the U.S. and even to deport people with no health issues after they are already in the U.S. He also spoke about the border fence, which was first erected in the 1990s under both G.H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton in San Diego. He added that Trump's fence was mostly replacement, not new.

Ultimately, Mr. DeBruhl brought us to today and the policies under President Biden. First, there is the attempt to push people to use ports of entry to reduce the number crossing without inspection and then employing "expedited removal" for those who don't use the ports of entry and banning them from re-entry for five years. Problem: Because of Title 42, people don't want to use ports of entry because there is a greater likelihood of being denied entry at them, but if they refuse "expedited removal," they can be detained, subject to legal processing, and be deported any way. Consequently, they are caught in a Catch-22.

Other pieces of this ever-tangled web:

- Despite an effort to ban re-entry attempts, 60% of migrants have tried multiple times.
- Where people are sent when being expelled depends on whether their home country has an agreement with Mexico or not. If yes, they are returned to Mexico; if not, they are sent directly back to their native land, which is the case for 88%.
- The U.S. will now allow 30,000 Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans into the country each month with two-year work authorization *if* they have a sponsor, pass a background check, apply from their home country, and arrive by air—no ground or sea travel.
- The U.S. will allow 20,000 migrants from other countries.
- There is now an on-line portal for applications, meant in part to avoid keeping people waiting in Mexico.
- People may also make an appointment at a port of entry, this with the intent to disrupt smugglers and help prepare communities receiving migrants.



Serving Refreshments outside Sacred Heart Church (high tech and airfare not on the menu)

While at least some of these policies may seem like sincere attempts to make things more efficient, consider how many people seeking refuge or asylum have the resources for such things as on-line applications or airfare.

And then we have the limbo of being a **DACA** recipient. Mr. DeBruhl invited **Efren Loya** to give us a first-person report on what that entails. Efren told us he was brought to the U.S. from his home in

Juarez when he was six years old. He is now 25. His DACA status enables him to have a Texas driver's license and a work permit, to travel within

the U.S. freely, but not outside the country lest he be denied re-entry. He cannot vote and could not receive any federal money for education. Nevertheless, he is a college graduate with a degree in Education. His older sister is a U.S. citizen, but it would take 18 years for her to sponsor him

to get his own citizenship. Consequently, to stay in the U.S. legally, Efen has to renew his DACA status bi-annually for \$495 each time. Since it takes six months to process, this really becomes a renewal every 18 months. The only consolation, if there is one, is that this was an annual process during COVID and the Trump presidency.

Our last night together ended with not only one last delicious supper, but some wine and cheese as well.

It is near impossible to measure the gift of this trip, the remarkable people who contributed to it in so many different ways, my fellow pilgrims, the tremendous information, the inspiring stories, and the rollercoaster of emotions. I highly recommend it. There are many opportunities. Mine was with the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers. You can contact them at <https://maryknollsociety.org/mission-immersion-trips/> or look into others on the web.



Our Group under the Statue of Cristo Rey at the Top of the Mountain