The Arizona Borderlands

Where humanitarian aid is being criminalized

BY CHRIS SERRES

ORTH into the heart of the desert we hiked, close together and quiet, over rugged terrain that bore visible traces of the thousands of migrants who cross the Sonoran Desert each year.

Near an arroyo, or dry wash, was a sun-bleached t-shirt bearing the name of a popular Guatemalan soccer team. Nearby was an abandoned pair of slippers, lined with carpet-like fibers, that migrants wear over their shoes to hide footprints. And every few hundred feet was an empty water jug, colored black to prevent detection.

The short expedition was organized by volunteers with No More Deaths, or No Mas Muertes, a remarkable humanitarian organization based in southern Arizona that I was following as part of an investigative report on the multiple perils faced by migrants seeking to cross the Sonoran Desert from Mexico. I learned of the group through one of its leaders, Jim Marx, who was born and raised on a farm in St. Michael, Minnesota, and became involved in helping migrants along the border after moving to Tucson in 2007.

On this bright November morning, Marx and a trio of veteran No More Deaths volunteers trekked several miles through dense desert scrub until they reached a high ridge with a pristine view of the Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge. Here, they hung plastic jugs of water and several wooden rosaries on the branches of a large mesquite tree. On each of the jugs, the volunteers wrote hopeful messages such as “No estan solos,” “Puedes hacerlo” and “Que Dios les Bendiga,” “You are not alone,” “You can do it” and “God bless you.” The hikers unloaded their backpacks of food, including granola bars and canned beans, into a bucket covered with rocks, to protect them from desert animals.

Then the volunteers stopped to reflect and pray next to the drop-off site as thirsty ravens circled overhead. “Sometimes I wonder, if everyone had an experience with
a migrant, would they still feel such hate?” asked Lois Martin, a longtime volunteer with No More Deaths, as she made her way down the hill. “No matter who is out here, they all deserve water.”

Since its founding in 2004, No More Deaths has remained committed to a simple mission: To end death and suffering of migrants in the desert. In the past three years alone, volunteers with the group placed nearly 40,000 jugs of water along migrant routes in southern Arizona, covering a vast, 2,500-square-mile area. In 2018, the group also trained 230 volunteers and helped more than 400 residents complete their naturalization process to become citizens.

No More Deaths routinely ventures into a violent, punishing—and often deadly—terrain. More than 3,000 migrant remains have been discovered in southern Arizona between 1999 and 2018, according to data gathered by Humane Borders. The young volunteers with
No More Deaths are sometimes among those who have discovered these skeletal remains. After the hike with No More Deaths, I visited the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner in Tucson, which has a massive and growing backlog of more than 300 unidentified remains. The morgue is so overwhelmed by unidentified bodies of migrants found in the desert that they recently had to expand and build a second, refrigerated unit to house them all. Chief medical examiner Dr. Gregory Hess carefully unzipped a body bag to reveal the badly decomposed skeletal remains of a body found days earlier in the mountains along the border. The bones were bleached by the sun and had visible teeth marks from scavenging animals that had gnawed on the remains.

John Reid, a volunteer with No More Deaths from Ajo, Arizona, has written poignantly about the experience of discovering the remains of migrants in the desert. “How does one ‘recover’ another who is dead? Another whose body parts are strewn about, blanched, clotted with dirt, or even intact, sun-seared and gray? Humans, even in death, shouldn’t look like this,” Heid wrote in a recent essay.

The thousands of migrant deaths in the Sonoran Desert are the direct result of U.S. border enforcement policies, argues Todd Miller, author of Border Patrol Nation. Specifically, the Border Patrol’s policy of “prevention through deterrence” has resulted in the diversion of migrants into ever-deadlier and more desolate regions. In 2005, the U.S. Justice Department began to require federal criminal prosecution of migrants crossing the border without authorization — a significant departure from past practice.

Yet, after more than a decade, the life-saving humanitarian work of No More Deaths — the very work that Jesus implored his followers to do — has suddenly become criminalized.

In the summer of 2017, one of the hottest on record in Arizona, four women volunteers with No More Deaths put out water and food on Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge, a vast and remote area
near the U.S./Mexico border, in the hopes of staving off death by dehydration for people crossing the desert. They were charged several months later with misdemeanor crimes related to their work. Another No More Deaths volunteer, Scott Warren, has been charged with harboring undocumented migrants.

The criminal charges against the humanitarian volunteers have received national and international media coverage, and have become a challenge to people of conscience across the country. In the courtroom, an attorney for the four volunteers urged the federal judge to remember Chapter 25 of the Gospel of Matthew: “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”

Chris Serres is a reporter for the Star Tribune and has been a parishioner since 2014.

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As we seek to grow in our faith, we are called to learn what is really happening in our communities, country, and world, and to reflect on this in prayer. We live with scripture in one hand and the newspaper in another.

To learn firsthand about the realities of immigration in our country, members of The Basilica traveled to the U.S./Mexico border in November 2018. Part education, part service, part formation, they spent three days hearing stories, learning about realities on the ground, and praying with people. They observed Operation Streamline in the Tucson Federal Courthouse and visited Southside Presbyterian Church where the Sanctuary Movement began in the 1980s.

At the Jesuit Kino Border Initiative in Nogales, Mexico they served the morning meal to recent deportees and listened to stories from women living in the shelter. At Home of Hope and Peace (HEPAC) they served lunch to Mexican school children and learned about the organization’s mission to create a healthy community in Nogales where citizens do not feel that their only choice for survival is to risk their lives in the desert in an attempt to immigrate to the United States. On their last day, they joined staff from No More Deaths for a desert walk near Arivaca, AZ.

Thank you to everyone who prayed for these fellow parishioners on their journey. If you are interested in learning more or getting involved in The Basilica Immigrant Support Ministry, contact Janice Andersen at jandersen@mary.org.

If you wish to donate to No More Deaths, please visit nomoredeaths.org or make out a check and mail it to the address below:

No More Deaths
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