

In the 80s I heard refugees from Central America share their stories. Around that same time I was involved in our congregation's sponsorship of a family of Vietnamese refugees. Years ago I volunteered at a small refugee camp near Brownsville; one of these refugees was Teodora (God bearer) who had walked from El Salvador (the Savior) to give birth to her child here where there was the hope that her child would know life rather than death. Like the orphans, widows, and strangers were the most marginalized, the most vulnerable in Jesus' day, that's how I've seen refugees for many years. I have been blessed by the hope, the resilience, the profound appreciation of life that resides in these refugees amidst the struggles, the pain, the uncertainty of life experienced by these sisters and brothers. So I feel very blessed to be able to minister as a compassionate presence honoring their dignity and I pray that my heart will be broken open again.

These are some of my reflections on our time in San Antonio. Catholic Charities of San Antonio was here yet today serving the people breakfast and then hot dogs and some cookies – AND coffee for lunch. The shelter ran out of towels for their showers today; they also ran out of shampoo. We had no socks for the adults. We also ran out of everything for the men and yet they were always gracious and very appreciative of our efforts and anything we could do for their families. All of them have traveled on foot and by bus or train for 15 – 30 days; they are tired and the journey has been difficult especially with small children and babies. By their spirit, their graciousness one would never know they have endured so much difficulty, so much tiredness. They are amazing.

It has been hard, tiring work. It doesn't seem like much; we're only sorting clothes all day and serving these Central American families in assisting them in finding a "new" set of clothes for use after their next stop to the showers. Today on our 6th day our bodies were so happy to be able to leave by 5:46 pm; power had gone out and so they were divided up between 2 smaller shelters. As physically tired as we are it's a blessing to be able to give them smiles and say "bienvenidos" (welcome); their smiles in return are such a gift. How anyone could ever be afraid of these people is beyond my understanding; I guess they have never met any of them and so can be fooled by all the fearmongering. If only every U.S. American could take the risk of volunteering at our mutual border or risk reaching out to these new neighbors in their local communities hearts would be changed. Then there would be a public outcry for comprehensive immigration reform. I don't think there are words to fully express the compassion, the hope, the heartbreak that I feel with these companions/these families in Christ. I love playing with these kids. I love asking the men or older boys to help me when we want to load all the grande (BIG) clothes into the car for Salvation Army; they immediately jump in to help.

Today I met Carlos Daniel, an 11 year old from Honduras going to Austin, Texas with his father. He said he wants to go to school to learn English; I taught him how to say his name and his age. I love these simple interactions with the people, especially with the children. He seems so unaware of the danger his dad has saved him from or perhaps he is simply excited about a new adventure here safe in the protection of his dad and the aunt they are joining in Austin.

Told Edgar Martinez today that I won't miss folding all the clothes. He responded that it's essential and he sees that space as a space of hope for the people – a sign of starting a new life. Physically we do so little and yet we get so tired – but emotionally we are Christ smiling reassurance and welcome to each of them. Yes, it's been a difficult journey after living in fear of death by the police, the gangs, or by hunger – but now they will survive and hopefully, they or their children will thrive in this new land. Our time with these who are seen as today's lepers by many has been a wonder full gift of immense blessing.

Ben told us yesterday that other shelters are demanding money from the people and then also asking the government for reimbursement; there are many here, even Catholics, making money off of this crisis. He said, "Money is evil".

On June 1 we met again 3 of the families at the airport. They were happy to see us again, and again they thanked us for all we had done for them. Later I saw two of the families again who seemed to be having some trouble being admitted into the gate area to await the plane to Houston; they eventually got passage so I didn't step in. Once in leaving a small refugee camp years ago near Harlingen, TX a Honduran refugee, Freddy, told me "te echo de menos" (he would never forget me) – this is how I feel about all those whom we were privileged to cross paths with during these two blessed weeks at the border.