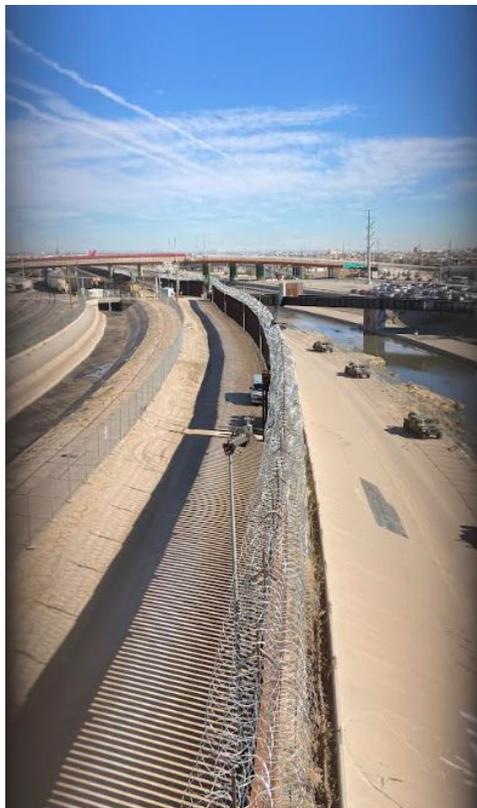


# Humanitarian Crisis at the Border

*by Sr. Sandra Ann Silva as told to Sr. Michaela O'Connor*



*Razor-wire-topped border between Texas (left) and Mexico (right).*

It all began because the Diocese of El Paso asked the LCWR to publicize a need for assistance at their southern border. A humanitarian crisis was erupting there with hundreds of refugees arriving daily to seek political asylum in the U.S. because of a spreading rumor that the oppressive Title 42, established by the Trump administration, was to be revoked. Title 42 was an emergency health order used for more than two years to quickly turn away migrants, including those seeking asylum at the southwest border. The Biden Administration had planned to wind it down, but Supreme Court Chief Justice John G. Roberts halted the lifting of the policy for at least 2 more months on December 20th, over-ruling the decision of a lesser court to lift it. He announced that he will hear arguments in February.

Kay Tierney (whom we remember better as Kay Courtney) was excited as she heard the invitation to go to the border to assist humanitarian help and see for oneself what was going on. She responded at once. She called Sr. Gladys, explained when and where she was going and asked if there might be a Sister who wanted to go

with her. Sr. Gladys issued the request and I responded immediately— it seemed like an actual grace. I spoke Spanish, I wanted to see for myself and I could help in practical ways.

On January 1, 2023 Kay and I flew from San Jose to Phoenix and from there to El Paso where our guide Maria met us and took us to a huge Loreto Convent. The Convent had no Sisters but was rented out by Loreto to various agencies with a wing dedicated to guest housing. Maria arranged the loan of a Toyota Yukon for us and we drove it, following her to a house some distance away where we met many wonderful people caught up in the immigration crisis.

We met a group of high schoolers from Minnesota, who were helping at the shelters. We met Venezuelans, not recognized by the U.S. as needing asylum. We met a family with

three children (the mother was a nurse). Among the refugees there were also a chef and a mobile phone technician. These people had practical, employable skills, and they were educated, not intending to be government supported. They had all been in the city but were at the house to enjoy some beauty and relax in a country atmosphere. They also wanted to “do something”, so were cooking for the guests there and helping with other chores for the residence.

The next morning Kay and I went to one of the Catholic Churches near the border. It was pouring rain and there was snow as well. It was extremely cold. We saw where mothers and children had slept overnight. While Mass was being celebrated more migrant people came into the building to escape the frigid outdoors and escape from the pounding rain. When mass concluded we moved among the people talking with them, and listened to their stories. They told us where they were from and where they hoped to go. Com-

passionate and concerned Red Cross workers moved among the groups also, giving out warm blankets and helping people who were arriving dripping wet and miserable. Inside the building shoes were distributed on the warm radiators, drying out. Some people had arrived without shoes at all. Outside the church building we walked among people sitting on the sidewalks shivering, wet, and hungry. And, I thought, each one could have been my nephew or niece, brother or sister, having had the misfortune to be trapped in a



*People waiting in snow and rain with shelter from Red Cross blankets.*



*People gather in line for meals served in gymnasium.*

country so corrupt that they had to escape it under these desperate conditions in order to survive.

After lunch – a meal that I felt guilty eating when hundreds of people I had just been with had had no food for hours, or even days, on their merciless journey – we rested a little and then went back to sort clothing and serve food to the refu-

gees. After the people's meal we gave out the clothing we had sorted into sizes and types, trying to give everyone something warm. It was a wonder to me that the teenagers, even under such horrendous conditions, were more concerned with how they would look (like teenagers everywhere) than with how warm they were. In the press of the crowd, the concern of parents trying to get protective clothing for their children, the length of the lines



*Men slept outside the church on the street.*

of needy measured against the amount of quickly disappearing clothing, the constant arrival of more people, it seemed like a zoo all around us. And yet, among these people who had just arrived that day or the night before, confused, weary to the bone and hungry, every refugee was respectful and asking for prayers. It was impossible to imagine the emotional and psychological waves washing over these poor people! Kay and I were exhausted at the end of the day.

The next morning Kay and I saw that the men who did not fit into the shelter were sleeping in the alley between the church and the school's gym where the women and children were sleeping. In the cold and

damp they lined both sides of the alley as close as they could manage against the walls. That day, they spent the daylight hours cleaning and sweeping the alley. They formed work crews led by natural leaders who gave them pep talks. The alley was now their house, the leaders told them, and they had to keep it clean. It was amazing!

During the morning the two of us went to Walmart with money to buy blankets and warm coats that were on sale there and yarn for a lady at the shelter so that she can "do something" during the long hours she waits to see what comes next. Then we were off to COSTCO to buy chickens to use for soup stock the next day in preparing some nourishing soup for the men who are on the streets. Our hope was to feed at least



*Women and children settle in for the night in the gym.*

100. The next few days would be devoted to making and helping to serve food, talking with the people and handing out clothing. It is typical to go back to the Loreto Convent at about 10pm. At night the women and children find a Community blanket amidst the folded ones piled on the floor at the side of the gym. They would pile them in the morning in an organized manner in hopes of finding the same one for the next evening. There are showers in the gym and the attentive Red Cross workers provided each person with a hygiene bag containing soap, toothpaste, shampoo, tooth brushes and other items for personal use as well as a bath towel. After so many weeks and months on the road, it must have seemed extraordinarily luxurious to have access to hot water for bathing.

We took a break and had some snacks which we shared with a young man who had not eaten for a few days. Another man came by, hungry for the same reason, and the younger one immediately had him sit down and share what he had. Another amazing moment. I am learning a lot about loving my neighbor here. I also sleep like a rock when I finally get to bed.



*The border fence in this area is topped with coiled razor-wire, and is based in a concrete foundation, a formidable obstacle.*

I am very moved by the stories I hear from the people. Even the little children share about the jungle they had to walk through and the muddy roads where they slipped and slid on the hillsides. One lady told me that she is in pure survival mode. She just walks along, looking ahead, worrying about her children, seeing little of the territory through which she passes. She spoke movingly about how painful it was to see a pregnant woman traveling with the same group die at the side of the road without being able to give her the help she needed.

I spoke with a man about 40 years of age who was struggling on crutches. He had broken his ankle. A chemistry professor from Venezuela, he could not make it there professionally so had come north seeking work. The volunteers here told me that there are many refugees who break their legs trying to cross the border by climbing the very high, razor-wire fences that kept them from crossing into Texas and jumping down onto the solid, cement covered ground of the north side of the obstacles. As for the volunteers themselves, they come from nearby parishes to help out, and are also arriving from other states.

New groups of people arrive at all times of the day or night. That particular day volunteers were waiting for a group expected to arrive at about 4 am. The Red Cross is also offering continual, effective help. I am finding the experience emotionally and physically exhausting.

In giving out clothing I am learning to understand the desperation of the

victims of these terrible conditions and am practicing a lot of patience. The women and children are bordering on despair hoping for something clean, dry and warm to wear as they come to me, finding it hard to wait for a turn and asking for things I often cannot locate for them. There is a young woman newly in charge of the distribution who, I think, will get the process better organized. I suggested giving out numbers and calling the people forward in small groups. The volunteers run back and forth from the large closet where donated clothing is kept, searching for the correct sizes and types of clothing most wanted. The people love the sweat pants and tops because of the warmth they provide and call them “monos”. Those are the most desired items of clothing. Levis, are abundant, but not popular among the arriving families because they are not warm. All manner of things have been donated to the center, even impractical high heels, but the good hearted donors send whatever they can, often not knowing the condition of arriving people or what the most needed items are.



*Where there is space, tents are available for overnighting in the street.*

One of my duties today is once again to assist in making soup for people on the street.

On the 5th we went to another Church to witness the program there helped by the Jesuit Relief Services. That particular effort is aimed at serving people who have been processed for immigration and need help to travel to sponsors living in the U.S. to await trial for political asylum. It is still a sad and frightening experience, but they, at least, cannot be swept up in the continual ICE raids and deported....yet. There we found psychologists working with the children or others traumatized by experiences on their journeys to the border. It was a much calmer place with an atmosphere in which a little hope was mixed into the desperation. Of course, there were no people from Venezuela there. They were back where we had started out from in the morning, and huddled around the first church, praying not to be rounded up by ICE officers and deported to some unknown destination far from the border and their families. Earlier in the morning we had gone to another church in the area to talk with the people clustered there. I saw a young mother with her husband and two beautiful children. I asked her how she was and she burst into tears. All I could do was to give her a big, long hug. What words could possibly be spoken that

could mitigate her fear, her all-consuming distress for her children, her loss of home, country, safety and hope? The parents did not know about the other shelters where food, clothing, medical help and more was offered to families. That lifted their hearts a little and gave them a place to seek out help.

Kay and I walked to a town not very far away, across the border into Mexico – Ciudad Juarez, where hundreds of immigrants wait on the Mexican side of the border. The sights and atmosphere there were very depressing, and Kay found it disturbing, so we spent very little time there. We found some more Venezuelan families. I talked to a little boy who look so hungry I asked him where I could buy him a taco. He did not know because his group had only arrived the night before. I talked to his older brother and gave him some money to buy food. All of this is human suffering hard to see, painful, calling out for any response one can give. We walked amidst a sea of desperate people. Kay and I crossed back into Texas where, that evening, we ate at a Denny’s restaurant. That hungry little boy’s face from the Mexican town haunted me all through the meal.



*Even in the hard conditions of the shelters,  
there is room for hope and touching moments  
of caring.*

Yesterday evening was January 6th, the feast of the Epiphany and all the children were given gifts from the three kings, showing how thoughtful, resourceful, and caring the shelter



*That’s Jesus’ Mama!*

personnel are in the midst of the chaos and stresses of this awful crisis. The children were so excited! It was one of the few joyous occasions we could celebrate with everyone. Some of the children knew the story of the Magi and pointed to a picture of Our Lady of Guadalupe painted on an interior wall of the building. I could hear them saying, “That is Jesus’ mother!” It was so sweet and hopeful.

The next day, Kay and I served breakfast to the people and then went to the church where Kay served hot chocolate in front of the church and I visited with people coming to enjoy the hot, delicious drink. I received two big blessings before leaving the Shelter. A young man with whom I had established a warm friendship was reunited with his dearly loved brother. The two had become lost from each other in the border crossing many days before. A pregnant woman, arrested with her husband by ICE, roughly handled, then released, received word that she was able to take a bus to her relatives.



*Clothing sorted and waiting for selection.*



*Family is family!*

The effect of the news was incomplete because there is no information about her husband's whereabouts or condition.

The days tended to blend together as we occupied ourselves with clothes sorting and give-a-way, cooking, serving meals and talking with the people. Kay does not speak Spanish, but was wonderful with making herself understood by the children as she interacted with them. One morning, having served breakfast and hot chocolate to the people at the church with Kay, I was talking to the people gathered there. I suddenly realized that Joe Boleyn from the Catholic Extension Society (whom I have known since 2010) was there and we had a nice visit. I was interviewed by Extension reporters and as questions were asked about

my experiences I got very weepy. The events of my visit had been very powerful for me and taught me that I still have stamina for this type of ministry, just being with the people and finding resources. It also reawakened for me a truth I had found out about my ministry years before: wherever a single Holy Family Sister is ministering the entire Community is present. And, after only one week among these families they had become like my own family. I am praying that their dreams of asylum, working in our country and hope for their futures come true, for all of them, perhaps especially for the invisible Venezuelans.

On January 10th, a Saturday, I found myself seated with Kay in the airport awaiting our flight to Denver and then home. It had been such a full and meaningful week of experience and awakenings. I am grateful for the opportunity, humbled by the reality, full

of desire for justice for these good people caught up in a bad situation. I pray that the hard hearts of politicians who create these situations for others will be touched by God's grace and soften. I pray that justice and humanitarian concerns will transform the immigration process of our country in such a way that people will be treated equally and with respect. Thinking of the suffering families I saw struggling for survival against tremendous odds I pray:

*May the God of mercy and compassion  
lighten their burdens,  
smooth their paths and  
bring them to safety and joy.*



*Piles of blankets signify the availability of warmth, the generosity of volunteers and donors, and the desperate need of the migrants.*

