



The Cincture

and

SENIOR PRIEST CONNECTION

MILWAUKEE CLERGY TRAVEL TO EL PASO

A Supplemental to The Cincture Newsletter & Senior Priest Connection

As a way to follow up on Bishop Mark Seitz's talk at the 2022 Fall Day for Priests and Parish Directors, the Archdiocese of Milwaukee through Catholic Extension offered an opportunity for diocesan clergy to travel to El Paso, TX and view first-hand what immigration looks like at the U.S. border. In August 2023, ten priests (Larry Chapman, Jose Gonzalez, Greg Greiten, Chuck Hanel, Jerry Herda, Justin Lopina, Ricardo Martin

Pinillos, Ariel Orozco, Oriol Regales, Mike Tedone (Brooklyn priest)) and five deacons (Michael Burch, Rob Chalhoub, Jim Matthias, Terry Starns, Jorge Zuniga) made the trek, assisting in general volunteer efforts for immigrants as well as practice ministry of presence, and shown what the Catholic church in doing the general area of El Paso and they wish to share with you a look into their experience.

FR. JUSTIN LOPINA REFLECTION

Recently, myself and several other clergy from the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, partnered with Catholic Extension on an eye-opening journey to El Paso. Over the span of our two day trip, we visited migrant shelters, spoke with migrant families, climbed Mount Cristo Rey, participated in group discussions, heard from guest speakers, and more. It was an enjoyable and enriching experience regarding the reality of migration and what the Church is doing to minister in that situation.

From the very beginning, the El Paso trip was different from other excursions I've attended. Mission trips, pilgrimages and CPE (Clinical Pastoral Experience) can all last several weeks or even months at a time. Catholic Extension, by contrast, is quite short. The whole experience is 48 hours in total, lasting from Tuesday afternoon to Thursday afternoon. At least for



me, that was a major factor. We all have people inviting us to things that we cannot commit to as active clergy. With the El Paso trip taking place in the middle of the

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workweek, we have a good chance of managing that, assuming we have no feast days or church festivals scheduled.

On the topic of the trip itself, the moments when you interact with the actual people at the border are the most impactful. There will be several moments where you have the very real opportunity to talk with people who are in the middle of the immigration process. The act of putting a smile on their faces, in such a tumultuous time, is absolutely

a moment of grace. As was explained to us, many migrants are at their emotional wits' end. They have suffered unspeakable hardship in their countries of origin and have arrived here in the US after what was almost certainly a harrowing and dangerous journey. They are alone in a

strange place, they don't speak the local language, they don't know if they have a sustainable future, and they may feel like they don't have anyone in the world who cares for their well-being. If you had five minutes to interact with a person like that, what would you do? Would you not do at least something to reassure them that they were in a safe place? Would you not reassure them of their human dignity in some way? Catholic Extension will give you the chance to do exactly that, and they'll foot the bill for good measure. Sure, your time with them will be limited. But you will have the chance to prove to them that there are Americans who wish the best for them. As Catholic clergy, perhaps that



counts for at least double the grace?

As my final word on this matter, please bear in mind that I'm a returned Peace Corps volunteer. I'm not an expert on much, but I understand international collaboration: the act of interacting with people of other nations and cultures. I have personally experienced how people around the world view Americans and why. The negative stereotypes people have to U.S. citizens are vast - doubly so if you happen to be white male. People assume the worst about us a lot of

the time. They expect us to be arrogant, cold, and condescending. If you can only believe one thing from me overall, believe this: showing kindness, concern, compassion, and interest in a non-U.S. citizen will erase an immense amount of prejudice and anxiety from their being. If you simply approach them and say hello in a friendly way, you will

restore a very real portion of their faith in humanity as well as hope for their future. Sure, some proficiency in Spanish will be a plus, but there are ways around the language barrier. What is important is that you show Christ's love for them as people, to say nothing of their status as the poor and needy. In the context of keeping a parish financially stable, or guiding the faith of 150 children in your parish's Catholic grade-school, a few kind words to a migrant might seem meaningless.

It. Is. Not. Meaningless. There are people starving for the

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basic kindness you and I receive every day. They have nothing. They know no one. They may know nothing about the reality of life in the US. Catholic Extension will give you the chance to allay some of that fear and anxiety and demonstrate that there are good and compassionate people in this part of the world. And you will do so much for someone in great need and in a circumstance of unbelievable hardship.

When I first started writing this, I didn't intend for it to be so obviously an advertisement for the Catholic Extension program. Still, that's the major thing I have to offer by way of personal reflection. We hope to get another trip together before long, and I hope that you consider taking part. It really is worthy of your time and Catholic Extension makes it as easy and affordable as possible. There are a number of us, myself included, who would love to go through this program again in the future. If you are even remotely interested in what Catholic Extension has to offer, know that you won't be going alone. If we do another, trip specifically as an Archdiocese of Milwaukee group, there is a very good chance you'll travel with at least a few people you know



and can rely on.

Consider that Catholic Extension offer as the chance to accomplish a great Biblical good. The greatest good we do in life is the good we offer to those who cannot possibly pay us back in return, as we know from Luke, chapter 14:

Then Jesus said to his host, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

FR. RICARDO MARTIN REFLECTION

Like Fr. Justin, I was not aware of the work of Catholic Extension when I also accepted its invitation for the immersion trip to El Paso. I would urge you to consider participating in one of the immersion trips Catholic Extension organizes for clergy in any of the 87 missionary dioceses in the United States.

This was probably the first of many surprises: learning about Catholic Extension and their amazing staff. As previously stated, there are 87 dioceses in the United States that are considered missionary dioceses. For me, this trip was one more reminder that behind any political issue, there are always human beings who experience it directly. It changes your perspective. And obviously, the main experience of the trip was meeting the migrants themselves and listening to their stories of courage and perseverance.



However, there was another group I was impressed to meet. It was the hands and the brains of the Church in El Paso, priests and lay people alike who have been working on the border for years. It made me reflect

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about how I do “priesthood” in my own reality.

First there was Mgr. Bañuelos, who recently retired after 47 years of active ministry in the Diocese of El Paso, which included founding a formation center for lay ministers. Next was Dr. Verónica Rayas, Director of the Diocesan Office for Religious Education, and the driving force behind many creative initiatives that has brought attention to such a difficult context. Then there was Marco Raposo, Director of Peace and Justice, who runs a shelter for migrants off the curial offices of the Diocese of El Paso.

Next, we met Jesuit Fr. Rafael García, the pastor of the only Jesuit parish in the State of Texas, who explained their joyful struggles to finance repairs of a historical church, while needing funds to continue running another shelter in the church’s hall. And last of all, was Sr. Marie-Paule Willem, F.M.M., who at 85 and having escaped Nazi persecution in Europe and military persecution in South America, finds herself leading a mission church in New Mexico.

Of all the clergy and lay people we met, they all spoke about what the border had taught them. There was a strength and a creativity that had a lasting impact on their theology, preaching and ministry.

Recently appointed to the South Side of Milwaukee, I wondered what that specific location would do to



my understanding of theology, preaching and my way of doing ministry. I pray that it will transform me in the wonderful ways in which it transformed all these amazing individuals we met.