

# CROSSING THE LINE

## A Spiritual View of the US-Mexican Border

*Daniel Groody*

**I**N MAY 2003, LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICIALS in Victoria, Texas, found the bodies of eighteen undocumented immigrants inside an abandoned truck. Dehydrated from a treacherous journey, they had suffocated in the sweltering heat of an unventilated tractor-trailer after being packed inside like sardines. They were men, women, and even a six-year-old boy; they came from Mexico, Honduras and Guatemala. Like many others, they had left their homes, families and cultures in order to find jobs in the United States of the kind that almost no one else wants: doing backbreaking work in the fields, deboning chicken in poultry plants, cleaning lavatories in restaurants, and many other difficult, dangerous and low-paid jobs. While the story of the deaths in Victoria, Texas, made international news, many similar events happen every day along the US-Mexican border. The suffering of so many immigrants at the border is not only an economic, political and social problem, but a spiritual issue as well. It is a challenge to the conscience of nations, and it also asks us to consider where, amid this tragic loss of life and terrible human misery, God might be.

The US-Mexican border is 1,952 miles long, and stretches from the shores of the Pacific Ocean near San Diego, California, to the shores of the Gulf of Mexico near Brownsville, Texas. Politically, it is the boundary between Mexico and the United States. Economically, it is the dividing line between the poverty of Latin America and the USA's prosperity. For the poor of Latin America, who make three dollars a day or less (and even low-paid jobs are scarce), the prospect of emigrating to the United States and earning forty dollars a day or more is magnetic.

Each day, thousands of immigrants try to enter the United States illegally through the southern border. Unable to obtain proper documentation for political and economic reasons, these immigrants, in their desperation, cross through desolate areas in order to bypass

## *Refugees*

Stealthily, we moved from the edges,  
Drawn by dreams of plenitude,  
Leaving our homes at the margins  
Of the deserted flatlands,  
Where nothing grows,  
And what we had of wheels and cogs  
Rusts and harbours cobwebs.  
It was fear that urged us on,  
Hacking at our hearts,  
Fear of a demented power,  
That fed upon its own illusions,  
And cut the navel string  
Which bound us to our Tribal Story.  
We were stripped at gunpoint  
At the precise point of intersection  
Between what passed as the frontier of nations.  
We carry nothing with us,  
But the golden memories  
Of a love that had once bound us together as a people,  
The incense of a gifted race  
Which had tilled a fruitful land for a thousand years,  
And we carry, like a sacrament,  
The myrrh of our Nation's woundedness,  
In which is mixed the wisdom of our ancestors.  
This is who we are.  
These are our gifts as we stand before your walls,  
And if this be not enough to gain entry to your land,  
Let the sun come down upon our dry bones,  
And the moon carve us a grave.

*Patrick Purnell*

long and impermeable walls, surveillance cameras, military technology and the vigilant eyes of border patrol agents. They traverse high mountains and cross through waterless, inhospitable deserts in order to reach the United States. Some run out of food and water along the way and never make it. Others are hospitalised with various kinds of heat-related illness. Still others are apprehended, put in immigration detention centres, and deported. And some, miraculously, make it across, only to find a whole new set of challenges awaiting them in a strange and foreign land. Because of increasingly restrictive border control policies, which have forced immigrants to take even greater risks to enter the US, the death toll has soared exponentially in the last decade. Between 1961 and 1989, 80 people died while trying to cross from East to West Germany in the hope of finding a better life and a more promising future on the other side of the Berlin Wall. Between 1995 and 2003, more than 2,500 immigrants have died while trying to cross the US-Mexican border in the hope of finding a better life and a more promising future in the United States. Today, on average, one immigrant dies while trying to cross from Mexico into the United States every day.

The plight of undocumented immigrants may be politically complex, but it cannot but bring to mind the words of Matthew 25, where Jesus speaks about the judgment of the nations:

... for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. (Matthew 25:35-36)

At the end, Jesus adds, 'just as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me'.

Scholars may continue to debate the meaning of the phrase 'least of these', but the parallels between Matthew 25 and the plight of Mexican immigrants to the US today are striking: hungry in their homelands, thirsty in the treacherous deserts they cross, estranged in their new land, naked after being robbed at gunpoint by *bandito* gangs, sick from the heat, and imprisoned in immigration detention centres, these immigrants manifest strikingly Christ's presence in the world.

One does see individual and collective responses to their plight, responses which embody the works of mercy that Matthew's Jesus mentions. Groups such as Humane Borders put out thousands of

gallons of water each year to aid stranded immigrants. The Samaritan Patrol sends trained volunteers and medical personnel to help the hungry and sick. The Valley Missionary Program in Coachella, California, offers retreats and community support to help estranged immigrants find a home in a foreign land. And human rights groups such as *Derechos Humanos* seek to break the bonds that imprison immigrants unjustly. Even with these efforts, however, undocumented immigrants remain some of the most vulnerable members of US society. Though their cries are often ignored, though their voices indeed are silenced amid the increasing concern about terrorism and national security, their narratives can do much to enrich our Christian spirituality today and our encounter with Christ in contemporary society.

### ***'I Was Hungry and You Gave Me Food'***

For most undocumented immigrants coming into the US from Mexico and Central America, the decision to leave home begins with hunger pangs. Employment is scarce, wages are diminishing, economic growth is sluggish, and poverty is extensive. Especially in rural sectors, many families are struggling simply to survive. Gustavo from Cuernavaca, Mexico, put it this way:

Sometimes my kids come to me and say, 'Daddy, I'm hungry'. And I don't have enough money to buy them food. And I can't tell them I don't have any money, but I don't. I can barely put beans, potatoes and tortillas on the table with what I make. If I am lucky, I can afford the luxury of potato chips or a piece of cake once a week. But that's it. I feel awful, but nothing is worse than seeing your hungry child look you in the eyes, knowing you don't have enough to give them.<sup>1</sup>

Even the border patrol will admit that ninety-eight per cent of undocumented immigrants are not drug dealers or criminals, but hard-working people looking for a job so that they can provide for their families. They go through the desert because they have to; they

<sup>1</sup> Mexican immigrant, interview by author, 18 July 2003, tape recording, Sasabe, Arizona.



risk their lives because they are looking for work; and it is from this suffering that a profound spirituality emerges. As John Annerino notes, 'nothing will stop these honest people in their quest for a better life, not the killing desert, and not the transformation of the "tortilla curtain" into the Iron Curtain'.<sup>2</sup>

The economic polarisation between Mexico and the United States became even clearer to me when I spent time talking with people on both sides of the border. On the Mexican side, one immigrant named Moisés said that he came to the area 'looking for enough money so that my family has bread to eat'.<sup>3</sup> On the US side, only a few miles away, I spoke with a woman at the San Diego tourist resort, who said that she came to the area 'looking for a specialty bread that I cannot find anywhere else'.<sup>4</sup> My conversations with these two people symbolize the disturbing reality of the border, a place where two people can both search for their daily bread but from two different starting points: one from desperation and destitution, and the other from affluence and luxury. The border is a place where the undocumented immigrant and the legal resident can inhabit the same geographical space, yet live in two totally different worlds.

<sup>2</sup> John Annerino, *Dead in Their Tracks: Crossing America's Desert Borderlands* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1999), 40-42.

<sup>3</sup> Mexican immigrant, interview by author, 18 April 2001, tape recording, Tijuana, Mexico.

<sup>4</sup> San Diego woman, interview by author, 18 April 2001, tape recording, San Diego, California.

For many immigrants, the journey to the Mexican-US border is a journey to Lazarus' door (Luke 16:19-31). It means sitting outside the gates, longing to eat the scraps that fall from the economic table of the United States. It is striking that in Luke's gospel we learn the name of the poor man, Lazarus, but we never learn the name of the rich man. The name 'Dives' emerged in medieval times: *'dives'* is the Latin word for 'rich' used in the Vulgate translation. So we do not know the name of the rich man; but we do know the name of the poor man. Along the Mexican border, however, the opposite happens. We know the names of the rich and famous, but the poor are often nameless. Many of those found dead in the desert are buried in cemeteries without any markers, with only a brick that says 'John Doe' or 'Jane Doe'. One of the most important struggles for immigrants, and the basis of their spirituality, is the search for human dignity. Though they experience a hunger for bread, their chief hunger is deeper: a hunger to be recognised and valued as people created in the image and likeness of God.

### ***'I Was Thirsty and You Gave Me Something to Drink'***

Though many immigrants struggle with hunger in their homelands, many others die of thirst as they make the treacherous trek across the deserts of California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. Immigrants have to walk as much as fifty or sixty miles in temperatures of over 120 degrees Fahrenheit (49 Celsius) before reaching major highways and towns. So intense is the heat that discarded plastic water jugs bake in the sun, and crumble like potato crisps.

Such conditions lead many immigrants to take desperate measures in search of water. Some break open cactuses and suck fluids out of the plant fibre. Others drink from stagnant ponds or from livestock water troughs, which are infested with diseases of every kind and with flesh-eating parasites. Some immigrants resort to drinking their own urine, or even that of farm animals, in order to survive. 'It's not pretty', said Daniel, 'but when you are faced between dying of thirst, you do what you have to do'.<sup>5</sup>

Amid such desperation, it is striking to hear stories of the spontaneous generosity that the spirit of the immigrants brings forth.

<sup>5</sup> Mexican immigrant, interview by author, 15 June 2003, tape recording, Altar, Mexico.

When Roberto crossed the desert a few years ago, he came across a couple who had been walking for three days. They had run out of water some time before, and their lips were brown and purple. They wandered around as though in a fog, like zombies, showing signs of hyperthermia and dehydration. Not uncommonly immigrants like Roberto, who are closest to suffering themselves, are most open to others in need. Roberto offered the couple the little water he had himself, and he saved their lives in the process. When I asked Roberto about this incident, he said, 'It was not a heroic act. It was simply action born from the heart; it was simply the right thing to do.'<sup>6</sup>

***Those closest to suffering are the most open to those in need***

As we reflect on Roberto's action, it is interesting to note that in Matthew 25 neither the damned nor the saved recognised the presence of Christ in the poor. We commonly think that the virtuous, like Mother Teresa or Dorothy Day, do have a lively sense of Christ's presence among those whom they serve. But in Matthew 25 they also said, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?' (Matthew 25:37) Paradoxically, the righteous have no sense of how their virtuous actions are sacramental. Roberto's story reveals a spirituality born in response to those who suffer, without thought of personal benefit, without regard to a person's nationality, without regard even to themselves or their future.

### ***'I Was a Stranger and You Welcomed Me'***

Displaced from their homes, immigrants to the US often feel a deep disconnectedness from all that they hold dear. Many have left behind their wives, children and extended families to try to make it to the United States, which seems in their imagination like a promised land. But when they arrive, they are soon disappointed. Even when they succeed in getting work, they often wonder if their employers simply view them as bodies without heart or feelings, without mind or soul, valued only for their economic contribution but not for their human and spiritual potential. They experience estrangement regarding culture, family, society, self and even Church.

<sup>6</sup> Mexican immigrant, interview by author, 15 June 2003, tape recording, Altar, Mexico.

Because of the indignities many immigrants experience, they often feel that their lives are worse than those of dogs. In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Luke says that even the dogs came to lick Lazarus' sores (Luke 16:21). It is not uncommon for immigrants to feel more in common with dogs than with other human beings on the far side of the border. As one immigrant, Miguel, says:

One of the worst things about being an immigrant is the feeling of discrimination, of being bossed and kicked around like you are a slave and humiliated because you are a foreigner. Sometimes I feel like even the dogs live better than I do, like I am the lowest form of life on earth. There is no worse feeling than feeling like you are not worth anything as a human being.<sup>7</sup>

One of the greatest hungers of the undocumented immigrant is simply to be welcomed by others in a society which is constantly reinforcing their inferiority.

### ***'I Was Naked and You Gave Me Clothing'***

One of the men who almost suffocated in the truck in Victoria, Texas, was a man named Angel.<sup>8</sup> After he left Guatemala and migrated north with his brother and sister, seven *mañosos* (*banditos* who prey on the vulnerability of immigrants) attacked them, tied them up, and raped his sister right in front of their eyes. Three more times during their journey, *mañosos* mugged, robbed and even shot at them. On one occasion, the *mañosos* took all of their clothes and left them naked except for their underpants. Angel was beaten so badly that he could not walk for four days.

Some immigrants like Angel not only lose their possessions, but their freedom. In order to cross the border they hire 'coyote smugglers', human-traffickers who charge \$2,000 or more. Unable to pay, and vulnerable also in many other ways, they become prey to an industry of labour trafficking and exploitation. When they get to the United States, they are sold off to farm-labour camps or even to prostitution rings as a means of paying off their debt. This leaves them not only destitute but—what is worse—enslaved. After everything is taken

<sup>7</sup> Mexican immigrant, interview by author, 15 November 1999, tape recording, Coachella, California.

<sup>8</sup> 'We Almost Suffocated in the Trailer Truck', *Houston Catholic Worker*, 23/4 (July-August 2003), 1, 8.





*Not Forgotten ...*

away from them, many immigrants say that the one thing they have left to hold on to is their faith and hope in God.

When I met Manuel, he was standing at the side of the road, waving plastic water jugs in his hands. He had just walked sixty miles across the desert, but when he could not keep up, his friends abandoned him. 'It was horrible', he said. 'First I ran out of food. Then I ran out of water. Then I began to pray.' When I asked how he prayed, he said, 'I suddenly realised that the only friend I had was God. All my other friends abandoned me, but I realised that God was the one friend that would never leave me.' As he spoke more about his own spiritual life, he said he compared his life to that of Job, who, like him, lost his home, his family, his possessions, his health and even his friends. 'Job's story is my story', he said: 'Job is an inspiration to me'. 'After all Job went through', Manuel continued, 'he never cursed God. Somehow all I've learned in life is how to suffer, but Job challenges me to be faithful as well.'<sup>9</sup> Like Job, immigrants such as Manuel realise that they come into the world naked, and will leave the world naked. It is the time in between that is the most difficult, when even the search for their daily bread is a constant struggle.

<sup>9</sup> Mexican immigrant, interview by author, 18 June 2003, tape recording, Arivaca, Arizona.

***'I Was Sick and You Took Care of Me'***

Sickness is a way of life for many immigrants along the border. Most are not accustomed to the physical exertion that their journey demands, or to the rough terrain. The cactus, mesquite and other prickly trees cause cuts and lacerations, and the rocky trails cause sprains, strains and fractures. Besides this, immigrants are vulnerable to venomous creatures such as scorpions and rattlesnakes, which they try to ward off by rubbing themselves with garlic when they go to sleep at night on the desert floor. Injuries in the desert can be fatal, since coyote smugglers often leave behind injured or weak members of a group, even if it means that they will die.

The most serious illnesses, however, result from the high temperatures, which can exceed 120 degrees Fahrenheit in the shade. Such conditions lead to dehydration, the inability to urinate, a weak or rapid pulse, vomiting and diarrhoea. Cramps begin in the legs, arms or abdominal wall, and the immigrants experience headaches, dizziness and confusion. The body begins to lose its ability to cool itself, and, if left untreated, the immigrant can lose consciousness.

After four days in the desert heat, Cesar spoke about how sick he became:

I couldn't hear right. I started hearing this buzzing sound in my ears and began to get dizzy. My mouth became dry to the point where I couldn't salivate ... I couldn't taste even the green-coloured water we had. Then my vision began to blur. Everyone looked pallid. My hands and feet went numb. The blisters were so big on my feet I couldn't feel them anymore. I started getting this really bad headache, and I could actually feel my heart beat, slowly, slowly. Everything was in a haze, like it was going in slow motion. My nose began to bleed and my throat tightened up. I thought, this is it; this is where I am going to die ... I didn't have any more strength to continue ... but I begged for just a little more strength from God ... and, miraculously, I found this strength to keep going.

Cesar went on to say that this experience gave him a whole new understanding of Jesus' temptation in the desert (Matthew 4:1-11):

Perhaps the greatest temptation was simply to resign, to give up, to allow myself to die in the desert. And it would have been easier to do this, but then I saw the faces of my children in the back of my

head, and the memory of them gave me the strength to keep going, to keep fighting, to not give up.<sup>10</sup>

Amid such suffering, it is nothing short of miraculous to hear immigrants, rather than dwelling on their pain, thanking God for the gift of life, even though it is threatened on many levels.

### ***'I Was in Prison and You Visited Me'***

It is the search for bread which often drives immigrants to cross over the border, and, tragically, this search also criminalises them. Though the natural law motivates them to provide for their families, US law prosecutes them for doing so. When they are apprehended by border patrol agents, they are taken to immigration detention centres, where they are finger-printed, processed, detained and deported back to their country of origin. They return even poorer than when they left home, and they remain caught between the pressure of poverty and the dangers of crossing the border again.

Beyond the risks of physical incarceration, however, many immigrants find themselves imprisoned by all kinds of negative stereotypes which further demean them as human beings. Since 11 September 2001 distinctions have been blurred even further than before between drug dealers, terrorists and immigrants, even though none of the terrorists involved in the attack came through the southern border and most came into the US through legal channels. All too easily, Mexican immigrants are subjected to racism, xenophobia and egocentric nationalism.

In recent years, armed vigilante groups along the Mexican-US border have emerged, declaring open season on trespassing immigrants. Some groups, such as the American Border Patrol, Ranch Rescue, and various Arizona militia groups, have declared a war on immigrants. Immigrants become scapegoats for national problems, and targets for those who seek an easy resolution to a complex issue. 'If I had my way', one rancher said, 'I'd shoot every single one of 'em'. And very little is being done to stop this from happening. One vigilante leader, named Jack Foote, summed up his sentiments when he said,

<sup>10</sup> Mexican immigrant, interview by author, 22 June 2003, tape recording, Tucson, Arizona..

You and the vast majority of your fellow dog turds are ignorant, uneducated, and desperate for a life in a decent nation because the one that you live in is nothing but a pile of dog shit, made up of millions of little dog turds like you. You stand around your entire lives, whining about how bad things are in your dog of a nation, waiting for the dog to stick its ass under our fence and shit each one of you into our back yards.<sup>11</sup>

While these vigilante groups represent the extreme end of anti-immigrant sentiment, many immigrants interiorise the feeling of being 'illegal' on various levels. The term 'illegal alien' not only speaks to their political status, but also characterizes the disconnectedness that many feel on other levels of their being. If we may label anything as 'alien' in the immigration drama at the US-Mexican border—certainly 'alien' to the mind and heart of Christ—it would be the very labelling of these immigrants as a threat to Church and society rather than as a gift.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, it is the experience of ultimate rejection that leads many of them to identify with a God who was once also rejected, a God who crossed borders, who immigrated, who suffered and who descended into hell—as they descend into the desert—in order to liberate them and bring them to a place of hope, freedom and life.

One does not have to look too far to see in the struggles of immigrants the presence of Christ crucified today. Immigrants experience an economic crucifixion in their poverty, a political crucifixion in their marginalisation, a legal crucifixion in their undocumented status, a cultural crucifixion in their displacement, a social crucifixion in their separation from their families and loved ones, and in many cases something comparable to a physical crucifixion in the painful deaths they suffer. For the undocumented, crossing the line into the United States is nothing short of a way of the Cross.

Not only does Catholic social teaching claim that the true test of a society is how it treats its most vulnerable members, but Matthew 25 challenges us even further to see the face of Christ in the faces of the hungry, thirsty, estranged, naked, sick and imprisoned. As the comparison with Matthew 25 suggests, the story of undocumented

<sup>11</sup> This paragraph is derived from Bob Moser, 'Open Season: As Extremists Peddle Their Anti-Immigrant Rhetoric along the Troubled Arizona Border, a Storm Gathers', <http://www.splcenter.org/intelligenceproject/ip-index.html>, 20 June 2003.

<sup>12</sup> William Fay, 'Catholic Social Teaching and the Undocumented', on [www.clincllegal.org](http://www.clincllegal.org).

immigrants along the US-Mexican border is mysteriously and inextricably intertwined with the story of a nation's redemption. In a society such as that of the US, which prides itself on self-sufficiency, these immigrants reveal everyone's utter need for and dependence on God, however cleverly the fortunate mask their existential hunger, thirst and nakedness. In a culture which prizes economic prosperity, immigrants, whom some see as a threat to the common good, speak of a wealth that cannot be purchased. And in a nation struggling with homeland security, many of these immigrants manifest a remarkable security in their faith and a moving ability to praise God, even as they are suffering acutely as unwelcome strangers in a foreign country. As one advocate for immigrants has said,

... we see in the immigrant a critique of modernity and enlightened rationality, individualism, self-dependency ... they give us a new way of understanding how to live and be in the world. Like Jesus, they critique society by the very way they live and move in the world.<sup>13</sup>

Immigrants prompt us to consider questions about our own security, about the depth of our own dependence on God, about our own wilfulness, and about our willingness to depend on others.<sup>14</sup> In brief, immigrants reveal a truth about life that only God can speak to and answer. As Jon Sobrino recently noted, 'outside the poor there is no salvation'. Immigrants not only compel us towards the works of mercy of Matthew 25, but challenge us to find in the presence of the stranger the presence of Christ in our midst.

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<sup>13</sup> Robin Hoover, interview by author, 15 June 2003, tape recording, Tucson, Arizona.

<sup>14</sup> For more on migrants and salvation, see Diane Bergant, 'Ruth: The Migrant Who Saved the People', in *Migration, Religious Experience and Globalization*, edited by Gioacchino Campese and Pietro Ciallella (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 2003), 49-61.