

Our southern border: *una herida abierta*

Sister Mary Hroscikoski

“The U.S./Mexican border es una herida abierta [open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again.” (Gloria Anzaldua (1942-2004). Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza, 1987)

Have you ever been able to ignore a cry for help coming from a distance? I have, regularly. But not as easily when it has come from up close. Such is the case for four of us Franciscan sisters living in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas (Sisters Gloria Haider, Shirley Mueller, Pat Forster and myself). When the number of refugees coming into our local Catholic Charities Humanitarian Respite Center (HRC) increased earlier this year, more volunteer help was immediately needed. Amidst our other ministry commitments and as soon as we were fully COVID-vaccinated, we all began to engage in part-time service there. Each week now, we welcome refugees, give out toiletries and clothing, serve meals and sort mountains of donations.

Questions come from contacts far and wide as the numbers keep increasing. Why are they coming? Is there really a border crisis? Why so many? Why would parents send their young children on such a journey alone? Why are they being let in? How are you doing? We reply...

- Our country has had a failed immigration policy for the past 40 years. And our government and corporate actions in other countries have helped create unlivable conditions for people there.
- We are now seeing some of the hundreds of thousands of refugees we had turned away in recent years, especially since 2019.
- The climate emergency has created a huge dry corridor in Central America. Farming, practiced by many, no longer provides subsistence. On top of COVID effects, Eastern Guatemala and Nicaragua and large areas of Honduras were decimated by back-to-back hurricanes last November. Hunger and malnutrition are widespread.
- Violence, intensified by hunger and cartels, adds to the misery of poverty, lack of opportunity and threat to life. Parents tell their children: “If you stay here, you will be killed. If you go, something terrible may happen to you, but death is not certain.”
- However imperfectly we follow it, U.S. law still requires that those at our border requesting asylum be allowed to enter to make their case.



St. Francis taught that, with all of creation, we exist in kinship as sisters and brothers. Isn't one of our highest gospel calls to love our neighbor as ourselves? And who is our neighbor? Jesus taught it is none other than those before us in need.

Sister Mary fills baby bottles at the Respite Center. When the number of refugees seeking help increased, she and others responded immediately.

Corporal Works of Mercy on the border

Sister Gloria Haider

Living in the Rio Grande Valley, I have become deeply concerned about two urgent needs here. One is the humane welcoming of immigrants. The Trump administration's 2019 "Remain in Mexico" policy and later the coronavirus kept immigrants from coming to the Catholic Charities Respite Center in McAllen, except for some pregnant women who could not stay in the tent camp in Matamoros, Mexico, while having their babies.

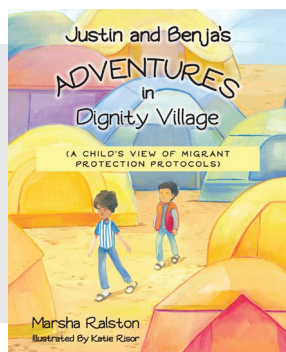
The Biden administration has rescinded the "Remain in Mexico" policy, but is being very slow at developing new policies. In the meantime, families that have sponsors in the United States are being accepted at the Respite Center and usually stay one or two nights only before moving on to their sponsors. At the Respite Center, we volunteers help feed and clothe the immigrants and also distribute hygiene products. For a few months before the pandemic spread, I also went to the tent camp in Matamoros across from Brownsville, Tex., to distribute hygiene products, food and warm blankets.

My second concern is food insecurity, which has become a big issue as a result of the pandemic, Hurricane Hanna (which hit south Texas in July 2020), and the February winter storm that brought power outages and water shortages to the area. I felt a nudge from the Holy Spirit to help distribute food through a food bank in Pharr. The staff there is well organized, and there are many volunteers. Working there on Wednesday mornings, I've helped distribute food to around 700 families. After the storm in February, this food bank held a Mass Drive Emergency Pantry at the Bert Odgen Arena in Edinburg, providing food assistance for 3,500 needy families. I have also become involved with food assistance through His Hands Ministries in Penitas.

It is with a grateful heart that I can help the people in the Rio Grande Valley with their basic needs. It is my way of doing the Corporal Works of Mercy.



We Franciscan sisters see the border crisis as a challenge to our nation's collective ability to care for others in need. While this is not easy, each of us can welcome and serve those at the Respite Center, where many hands make light work. Sister Mary Hroschikowski (seated) with Sisters Pat Forster, Shirley Mueller and Gloria Haider.



Sister Gloria also reports that Marsha Ralston, a friend she met while volunteering, recently wrote a children's book about the camp that is just across the border in Matamoros. The book is called *Justin and Benja's Adventures in Dignity Village: A Child's View of Migrant Protection Protocols* (Christian Faith Publishing, Inc.). It describes the friendship that develops between two young boys as they share adventures in the tent camp. She highly recommends this book.