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Our Matthew 25 duty on the US-Mexico border

John Dear S.J. | Apr. 13, 2010

In this 2009 file photo, volunteers with the humanitarian group No More Deaths leave food and water for illegal immigrants crossing into the Arizona desert from Mexico. (CNS)

It was Holy Week, and we walked for miles through the desert. We hiked along ribbons of dirt paths, over parched rocky hills near the U.S.-Mexico border. The closest U.S. city was Tucson, Ariz., some 30 miles to the north.

Ours was an uncomplicated mission -- to place some 40 gallons of water where some of the thousands of sisters and brothers who cross the border at this "sector" can find them. It is a great risk for them to make this trek. Especially in the desert heat.

The attempt has killed 86 people since the first of October in the "Tucson sector" alone. In 2005, 216 died. Some froze to death, some died from injuries, others by thirst. And the death rate, according to authorities, has been dramatically rising. Even those who make it endure a harrowing, violent journey -- and face uncertainty thereafter wherever they land.

Our work was simple -- no big deal. We were doing our Matthew 25 duty: "I was thirsty and you gave me drink." But turns out, such work breaks U.S. laws, and to engage in it amounts to civil disobedience.

Authorities have periodically charged those who leave gallons of water in the desert with "littering" -- this, despite the fact that those who leave the water usually pick up far more empty bottles and debris. Christian authorities should commend them for following the example of Jesus. Civil authorities should commend them for beautifying the landscape.

But neither is the case, forcing our gesture into being a symbolic act -- and a politically charged one at that. Our trudging through the desert challenges the premise that these "illegals" have no business being in our backyard. Our taking effort and trouble proclaims the preciousness of their humanity. It says, despite our national crabbiness, we welcome them.

And like all good symbols, this one doesn't merely hang in the air like a mist. It is incarnate and real. The water gets drunk, bodies are replenished. The friends who do this humble work of mercy save real people who are

desperate and dear. At nearly every stop, the gallons from the last drop were left there, empty.

So off we went, a kind of walking "Stations of the Cross." And along the way we came across the "illegals'" detritus -- empty soda bottles, shredded clothing, broken shoes, and one little girl's pink backpack, torn and threadbare from the unrelieved sun and the harsh terrain.

Our random discoveries added to the eerie feeling of being at the end of the world. In all directions, barrenness, hills of sand and rock, dusty dry shrubs, cacti of every description. And improbably, miles of yellow flowers. The desert in bloom -- an incongruity to my mind. I took it as a sign of welcome.

The day was hot, the breeze gentle. And all told we walked for seven hours. Our muscles ached and our feet throbbed. Thirst heightened among our own little band. We were dry and tired. But we breathed a sigh of deep satisfaction; we had fulfilled our mission.

And we had managed a moment of solidarity with what our migrant sisters and brothers endure. Blisters and aching feet, sunburn and thirst and hunger, the risk of injury. What they bear alone, however, is the sheer terror of armed U.S. border police on the prowl, their adrenaline at an excited pitch in anticipation of making an arrest.

And more, they fear their paid "coyote," the man hired to lead them into the U.S., a corrupt man in some cases who extorts and threatens and, sometimes, rapes. Their life is in his hands and he knows it. If he has a mind to, he can oust them and turn back and leave them for dead. This happens all too often.

As we trundled along, toward the border we saw a U.S. helicopter hovering low. It is a tool of surveillance, to be sure, but also a weapon of sorts. There are frequent press reports of migrants who sustain injuries when helicopters swoop down on them, forcing them under the bushes.

Something of a panic follows. They stumble, split up, break apart -- one thinks of the infantile amusement of the pilot. And in scrambling, the group dissolves. Everyone thereafter must face the trackless terrain on his own, and often loses his way.

No other way to characterize it but that this is war against migrants. "Asymmetrical war" in the euphemism of the Defense Department, but war nonetheless. And in response a grass-roots human rights movement has arisen in Tucson: No More Deaths (www.nomoredeaths.org). Each summer they camp in the desert, leave water, search for the injured, and hold vigils for those in need. Their creative campaign is a whole new chapter in Gospel nonviolence and Gandhian satyagraha.

Our guides through the desert were my friends Leslie Klushmire of the "Rose in the Desert" Catholic Worker and Jim Marx from No More Deaths. Along the way they shared harrowing tales of some of the migrants they've met. They spoke, for example, of a young man they met recently who had made the journey, had no more money, and was asking directions for a town in Alabama, where he hoped to meet a relative. He thought it was just a few miles away.

On the day I was with them we met no one, which was a good sign -- it meant no one was desperate enough to come out of hiding for help.

When we visited the "No More Deaths" camp, in a very remote area, we gathered before a make-shift shrine for all the migrants who have died. The sight was heartbreaking. Near a cross lay dozens of children's shoes and backpacks, hairbrushes and women's clothes. Over the years, volunteers had picked up these last remains of life in the desert.

I am so grateful to these good folks who serve our migrant sisters and brothers and, through them, the suffering

Christ. Their commitment reaches high and their compassion reaches deep, and they know their business. They say we need radical reform. We need more porous borders, new policies that keep families intact. They condemn our militarization of the border, our scape-goating, our selfishness and violence.

Homeland Security, they say, has near carte blanche to wage war on the poor. Meantime prison builders and equipment contractors grow richer. And politicians cast migrants as the enemy as a strategy for reelection. Migrants are not the enemy, say my friends. They are lovely people. And this new type of war is no mystery. It stems from our privilege in proximity to their extreme poverty. Indeed, the tide crossing our borders can be laid at the feet of NAFTA and corporate greed. Over and over, migrants tell the No More Death volunteers: "My children were always hungry."

We saw the hunger first hand in Nogales, Mexico, where we visited the Comedor, a soup kitchen and refugee center run by the Jesuits and the Missionary Sisters of the Eucharist. They serve two meals a day to the hundreds dumped into Mexico after the U.S. deports them. The work at the soup kitchen goes on non-stop; the deported slump in hunger and exhaustion, but leave grateful for the human exchange.

Sometimes, the government, spiteful and vindictive as it is, gambles with deportees' lives. Instances are known in which drivers transport them hundreds of miles to a different border section of Mexico, far from sustenance and help, often without identification. A kind of devious, wanton extra-judicial punishment. Meanwhile evidence mounts that so-called coyotes, running greater risks, are shaking down their clients, taking every penny, threatening them with injury and rape.

Add to this "Operation Streamline," a recently launched program that expedites convictions. After arrest, a migrant goes straight to a U.S. federal court, where about 70 migrants are convicted each hour. Due process has no place there. After repeated convictions, they go straight to prison, usually one owned by Corrections Corporation of America, a for-profit prison that issues stock and has shareholders. Such an arrangement, need it be added, makes a mockery of justice. Imprisonment of migrants serves economic interests. (On the other end are taxpayers. They pony up $11 million a month to incarcerate migrants and another $10 million a month for court costs.)

As I trudged in the heat, trying to take in the magnitude of the injustice made me dizzy. But when presently we headed down a stony hill into a hidden canyon my agitation settled and my thoughts coalesced. It was along this path, a few years back, that Josseline Hernandez Quinteros and her 10 year old brother, both from El Salvador, journeyed from El Salvador through Guatemala and Mexico in hopes of reaching their mother in California.

After scaling the border wall, Josseline grew sick. Stay here, the coyote told her, here on the path above the canyon. In a few days, he said, he would return for her. Some friends did return and found no sign of her. Two weeks later, Dan Millis, 28, a heroic volunteer from No More Deaths, found her dead by a small creek hidden at the bottom of the canyon. Her swollen feet rested in the water. Nearby on a rock sat her shoes. (See the new book for the full story: *The Death of Josseline*, by Margaret Regan, Beacon Press.)

Josseline, age 14, died alone in the desert.

My friends and I went to the spot where her body was found. And there we stood in silence, offering prayers for Josseline, for all the migrants, for the crucified of the U.S. war machine. "May no more children die," I prayed. "Not one more migrant, not one more sister or brother, not one more Josseline."

Calvary, I thought. Here is another Calvary, where the victims of imperial brutality die yet again. Fittingly, a nearby white cross stands as a memorial to Josseline, and a rebuke to the nation.

As for Dan Millis, two days after finding Josseline, he went back to work, this time at the Buenos Aires

National Wildlife Refuge, southwest of Tucson. He carried with him gallons of water. Police arrested and ticketed him.

What to do? Certainly Gospel nonviolence calls us to enact a radical new immigration reform. A simple matter, really, a matter of compassion, social justice, and unconditional love. On its website, No More Deaths outlines some basic "Faith Based Principles for Immigration Reform." In part it reads:

- First, recognize that the current militarized border enforcement strategy is an ill-conceived policy. Since 1998 more than 4000 migrants have died. These tragic and unnecessary deaths must stop?.
- Second, address the status of undocumented persons currently living in the US. Workers and their families currently living in the US must have access to a program of legalization that offers equity-building paths to permanent residency and eventual citizenships for workers and their families.
- Third make family unity and reunification the cornerstone of the U.S. immigration system. Families must be allowed to legally and timely re-unify as well as to immigrate together as a unit.
- Fourth, allow workers and their families to enter the U.S. to live and work in a safe, legal, orderly, and humane manner through an Employment-Focused immigration program.
- Fifth, recognize that root causes of migration lie in environmental, economic, and trade inequities ...

We need radical immigration reform, indeed the disarmament of the country at every level. Walking those Stations of the Cross in the desert near Tucson makes that all too clear.

Our prayer: May Josseline be the last child to die, may we wake up to our responsibility. May we welcome everyone as sister and brother. May we seek God's borderless reign of peace with all our hearts, minds, and political will.

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For further information, No More Deaths at www.nomoredeaths.org, and the Catholic Worker at www.roseofthedesert.org, also: www.Samaritanpatrol.org, www.humaneborders.org, www.borderlinks.org, www.derechoshumanoz.org, and the Catholic Campaign for Immigration Reform at www.justiceforimmigrants.org

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To contribute to Catholic Relief Services' "Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund," go to: http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn. John will lead a retreat, "The Gospel According to John," April 30-May 2, near Stroudsburg, PA, see www.kirkridge.org; and "Gandhi, King, Day and Merton," at Ghost Ranch Center, Abiquiu, NM, see www.ghostranch.org. He will lead weekend retreats on "Jesus and the Gospel of peace" in Massachusetts, May 21-23 (see: www.rowecenter.org) and Los Angeles, June 17-20 (see: www.hsrcenter.com). John's latest book, Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings (Orbis), along with other recent books, A Persistent Peace and Put Down Your Sword, as well as Patricia Normile's John Dear On Peace, are available from www.amazon.com. For further information, or to schedule a lecture, go to www.johndear.org

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