

Church's role in helping immigrants indispensable, says Texas bishop

Brenda Nettles Riojas Catholic News Service | Nov. 4, 2011



A section of a vehicle barrier used to prevent drug and immigrant smugglers from driving into the United States is seen along a U.S. Border Patrol access road at the U.S.-Mexico border east of Douglas, Ariz. (CNS photo/David Maung) (July 29, 2010)

SAN ANTONIO -- A Catholic bishop told a San Antonio audience that "as a leaven in the wider community of peoples" and the bearer "of conscience and of hope," the church must work in favor of the immigrant, preach the Gospel and focus on the youths.

After outlining the changing dynamics of immigration and violence and addressing some of the effects on the local communities, Bishop Daniel E. Flores of Brownsville offered his "pastoral perspective and some thoughts about the indispensable role of the church in facing the current reality on the border."

He emphasized the need "to call attention to the plight of the innocent who suffer," and to the "urgent task" of connecting youths to the life of the church.

"We must raise a call to conscience for the people of our two great nations to see how a culture of violence and death is destroying a people and a culture that has endured and flourished on both sides of the border for many generations," he said. "This destructive blight affects us in different ways on the two sides of the (Rio Grande) River, but they are interrelated ways."

"We must insist in season and out of season that a just people distinguishes between the innocent and the guilty, and that a great and generous people respond to the plight of the widows and the orphans, those who mourn the loss of a brother, or a nephew, or a grandson," he added.

Bishop Flores spoke at the opening of a recent immigration symposium at the Mexican American Catholic College.

"It particularly falls to the whole church in communion with the bishops in the United States to insist on a national level that current immigration law is neither sufficiently humane nor sufficiently realistic, especially in light of the rapidly changing dynamics affecting our people and our communities," he said.

"It is a source of national embarrassment," he continued, "that state and federal officials cannot reach a

comprehensive, cohesive, humane and realistic approach to the current crisis."

He pointed out that "we are living in the United States in the midst of an expansive secularization which, among its other devastating effects, seeks to relegate to the sidelines of national discourse any contribution that is offered by a religiously committed people."

He noted, however, "we can never act as if our faith has nothing to do with the general welfare of our brothers and sisters and the wider community."

Beyond political and social activism, the bishop said, "it falls to the church to provide the resources of grace to our people that make it possible for them to promote a culture of justice, generosity and perseverance."

Bishop Flores urged his audience not to despair, saying that sentiment "saps the human and spiritual resources of a people" and it is something that is "rapidly happening" in northern Mexico and south Texas. Instead, he called them "to open wide the streams of grace that nourish us all, so that we can be equipped with the strength and courage that only the Lord can give."

"The most enduring and effective remedy we offer in this troubled time is to do what we have always done, only with a greater sense of generosity and urgency," the bishop said.

"We need to teach the Gospel, prepare our people for the sacraments, provide for a real experience of communion with Christ in the church, and give to all the generations that follow us a sense of the noble call to be courageous and kind, good and generous and forgiving."

All have "a heavy obligation to make the new arrival welcome in our churches and at our parish activities," the bishop added.

Reflecting on the future of the border, Bishop Flores turned his attention to youths and families, saying "the ones most at risk are our kids" and pleading with parents to "spend time with your children."

He talked about the "glamour of evil" for 11- or 12-year-olds who are recruited by the cartels.

Eleven- and 12-year-olds "are making decisions about whether to make money quick and easy, or risk being beat up if they choose to live an honest kid's life and go to church, go to religious education classes," he continued.

"The border violence," he said, "is not simply about security around the line of demarcation between two sovereign nations; battles are being fought on the borders of the soul that mark the difference between life and death, grace and sin. The conscience of an 11-year-old is the principal battle ground in the current border wars."

Bishop Flores called for Catholics to see "the urgent necessity of our evangelization efforts, our catechetical and formational efforts on behalf of our families, our young people, our young adults, indeed on behalf of the whole world."

He cautioned, "if our younger children do not find the right place to belong in the wider community of the parish, they will easily find themselves invited to belong to a gang or a cartel."

"Sometimes I think we adults do not truly appreciate how an example of generosity and charity impacts the conscience of a young person. Maybe we get cynical about such things. But the heart of a child is a sacred place, and the early impressions of the sacredness of life and the goodness of God can have a lifelong impact."

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