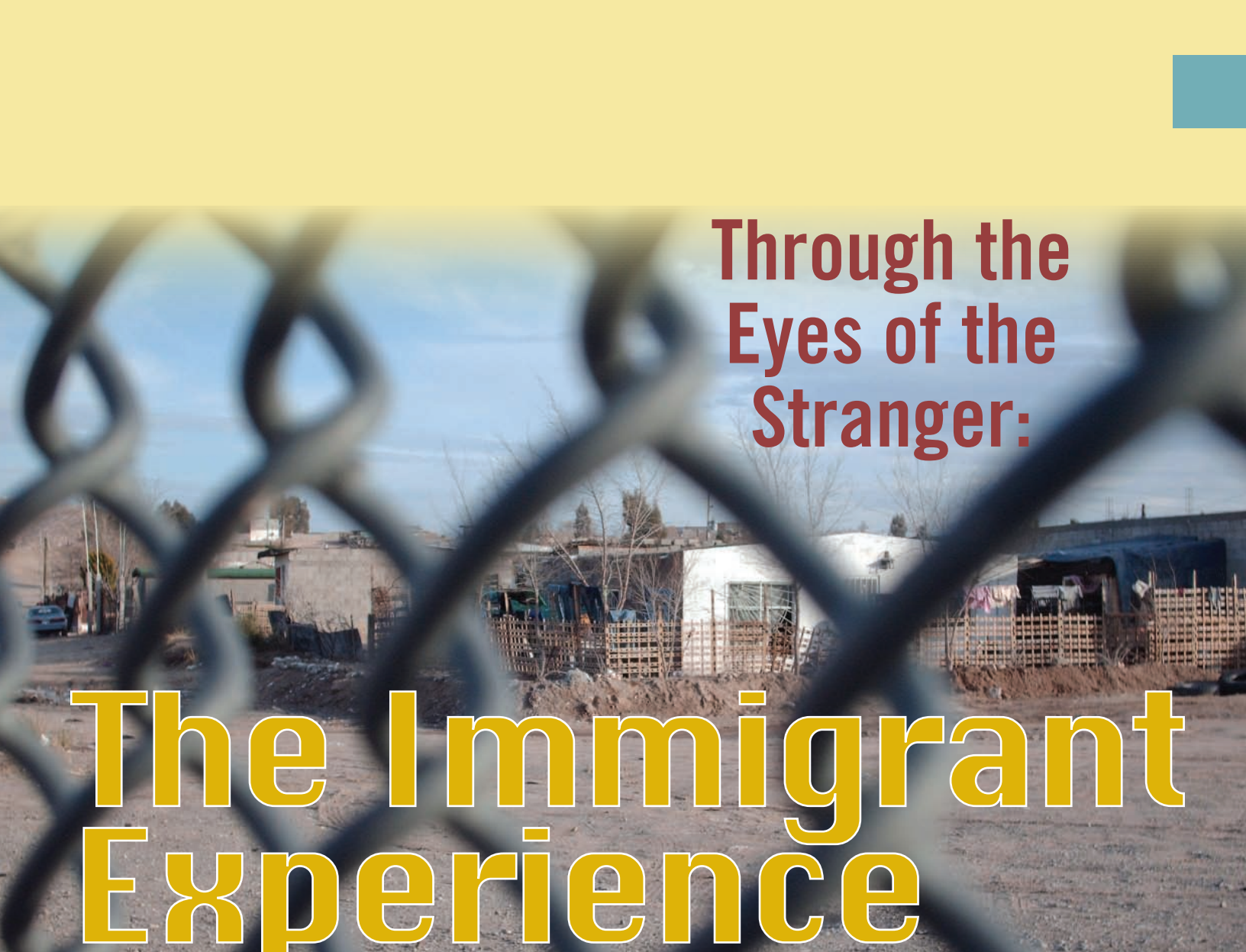




Through the Eyes of the Stranger:

The Immigrant Experience

By Julie Bourbon

New Orleans was home base for a January meeting of Jesuit immigration advocates from the U.S. and Latin America. Fr. Tom Greene, S.J., a founding fellow of the Jesuit Social Research Institute at Loyola New Orleans (loyno.edu/jrsi/), was host and guide to four of his lay colleagues on a journey that took them from federal immigration court to a detention center in Jena, Louisiana, to a home for detained minors in Houston.

Although Greene has traveled south of the border many times in his work with immigrants and detainees, a ministry he is passionate about, his counterparts across Latin America were largely unfamiliar with the workings of the U.S. system, where so many of their countrymen and women end up on their journeys to find a better life for themselves and their families.

“It was one of the first times we’ve gotten to do an ‘immersion program,’ if you will, for Latin Americans in the United States,” said Greene. It was important for his colleagues to see firsthand how the system works in the U.S., “in all its complexity,” he added.

“The U.S. is the receiving/destination country. The others [except Costa Rica, which receives many Nicaraguan immigrants, and Dominican Republic, which receives many Haitians] are transit or expulsor countries, so the context is different,” Greene said. “The solutions [to the immigration debate] need to come from both sides of the border.”

An important factor in planning the institute was Greene’s realization that his Latin American colleagues did not quite grasp the magnitude of the U.S. immigration and detention system—for instance, there are more than 300

immigration detention centers across the country that operate under an IGSA, or intergovernmental service agreement, which means they are privately run and contracted through ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement). In total, they house roughly 30,000 detainees per day. The United States deported approximately 330,000 people last year.

The 10-day gathering grew out of the work of the Jesuit Migration Service (Servicio Jesuita a Migrantes, or SMJ), a network of Jesuit and Jesuit-affiliated organizations throughout North and South America that aims to cooperate on academic research, advocacy, and social/pastoral care of immigrants. The group’s emphasis is threefold: socio-pastoral (for example, providing shelter for immigrants), academic (research and writing), and advocacy (civic campaigns). The New Orleans Province of the Society



of Jesus and a private foundation in New Orleans sponsored the trip.

“In this 10-day workshop, I learned more than in many years of reading,” said José Luis Rocha of SMJ Nicaragua. “This ground-based workshop enabled me to understand experiences and even to provide advice about the U.S. legal system, immigration procedures, and institutions to turn to for help.”

The agenda was nonstop, from start to finish. The first three days were spent in New Orleans, where Greene and his colleagues, Maria Canchola (SMJ Mexico City), Karina Fonseca (SMJ Costa Rica), Barbara Suarez (SMJ Dominican Republic) and Rocha first attended Mass at Mary Queen of Vietnam Church in New Orleans East. The parish is home to a strong Vietnamese community as well as a vibrant Latino community. The group was hosted by the latter, whose members shared their immigrant experiences and then prepared a special meal after the liturgy. Greene first became familiar with the parish when the Vietnamese pastor invited him to celebrate Mass several years ago. “He wanted to reach out to the Latino immigrants in the same way the U.S. reached out to him when he arrived

as a refugee from Vietnam in the 70s,” explained Greene, who speaks Spanish.

They visited the next day with staff from the New Orleans Hispanic Apostolate and the Mexican Consulate, getting a better perspective on immigration issues in New Orleans since Hurricane Katrina and detention issues generally. The visitors were then treated to some fine Southern hospitality with dinner at Café Reconcile.

Greene and his group next visited immigration court, met with an officer from the New Orleans Police Department who talked about public safety and worker rights, then interacted with an advocacy panel that included other Jesuit colleagues discussing their work on behalf of migrants and detainees in the United States.

“We heard about different approaches and got a broad overview of what they do and how they work,” said Greene, noting the importance of understanding

all aspects of the immigration system and the roles of all the players. “We believe that we do need to work through channels [governments, courts, etc.] to effect change.”

Next the group hit the road, visiting with victims of a raid at a Howard Industries plant in Laurel, Mississippi, where more than 350 workers were detained in August, 2008, for living and working in the country illegally. One of the raid victims shared with them the story of her ankle monitoring device (see photo below), which she has worn for over a year and a half. She can never take it off and must shower and sleep with it on. To recharge it, she must sit next to the wall socket for up to three hours per day. It has caused rashes and skin problems.

“The immigrants affected by the raids shared their stories of horror and feelings of dehumanization that day,” said Jill Gerschutz, former migration policy director at the Jesuit Conference in



An ankle monitoring device worn for over a year and a half by a victim of an immigration raid in Laurel, Mississippi.



A bridge from El Paso to Juarez.

A mural on the wall of Annunciation House, a privately run shelter for immigrants in El Paso. Other shelters in El Paso will not give beds to people without proper documents, often leaving women and children without a place to sleep. Annunciation House takes all who seek shelter.





At the U.S.-Mexico Border, on the outskirts of El Paso. From left: José Luis Rocha, Karina Fonseca, Maria Canchola, Barbara Suarez, and Fr. Tom Greene, S.J. Children in Juarez watch from the other side of the border fence.

Washington, D.C., and a speaker on the earlier advocacy panel. “Listening to those migrants both further inspired my advocacy and further convinced me that migrants have so much to offer the church.”

After visiting Laurel, they traveled to a federal detention center in Jena and to immigration court in Houston, where Greene and his group learned the importance, during a private Q&A session with a judge, of having a good translator in the courtroom. As Greene recounted later, one of his colleagues addressed the judge in Spanish, saying he was “totally ignorant” of U.S. immigration laws, only to have it translated that he “totally ignored” the law, an alarming error that could have real consequences during a deportation hearing.

Canchola, whose work in Mexico brings her into constant contact with men, women and children who have been deported from the United States, said of the experience: “In practical terms I was able to understand how the immigration system works in the U.S.A., so now I feel more secure about giving advice or answering questions from the immigrants’ families when they ask me about where and how to find immigrants if they have been detained, and the procedures that immigrants will have to follow in case they are detained by ICE.”

Next, the group visited a detention home for minors in Houston. Through the

federal Office of Refugee Resettlement, Catholic Charities runs five shelters that house up to 100 children each in “much more humane” circumstances than the adult prisons, Greene said, adding wryly, “but it is [still] detention.” There, children take classes and field trips while they await disposition of their cases or reunification with their families.

They rounded out the trip with several stops in El Paso, including one at Sagrado Corazon, the Jesuit parish. While in El Paso, Greene said, “children from Juarez on the other side of the fence came running up to speak with us. Within minutes of our arrival at this semirural location, the Border Patrol arrived and watched our interaction, eventually approaching in their vehicle to ask what we were doing,” he recalled. “Sad times when you cannot share a conversation with children across the border.”

They finished the day in Juarez, Mexico, where they learned more about human rights before returning to New Orleans and parting ways.

“Last year I conducted fieldwork in areas where there are many Nicaraguans who were affected by the deportation processes,” said Rocha, after returning home to Nicaragua. “They told me about the courts, the prisons, the shelters, the border patrols, the border landscape, and the nice people who help immigrants to reach their goals. I always tried to imagine how rough their experience was.”

The experience opened Canchola’s eyes to the realities of life that the immigrants experience in the U.S. “It was also clear, more than ever, that immigrants are there because the economic system requires them to guarantee the current status quo. Without them, the U.S.A. wouldn’t be able to compete in the international markets; they are a cheap labor force, they are disposable, they are ‘invisible.’”

Greene is hopeful that his Latin American colleagues will be able to put this experience to use in their home countries, as they counsel both those thinking of making the arduous journey to the north, and those who have been sent back, often experiencing terrible brutality and disappointment along the way.

“Our colleagues in Central America and Mexico always do such a wonderful job helping us to understand the reality of immigrants and the communities from which they come,” said Gerschutz. “It was wonderful that Tom afforded Maria, Barbara, José Luis, and Karina an in-depth opportunity to understand our reality a bit more. It will surely facilitate our joint advocacy efforts for the rights of immigrants.”

Greene agreed. “It brings it to a whole new level, to see it all firsthand,” he said of the experience, noting that only by meeting immigrants and hearing their stories could one really have an informed opinion about the immigration debate. “We’re all in this together, and we’re all looking for solutions. The better we understand each other’s context,” the better we can work together.

Julie Bourbon is the editor of The Southern Jesuit.