

A Lesson in Compassion

BY SUE WEISHAR, PH.D.

Catholic Teach-In on the Child Migrant Crisis and Its Causes



Participants listen to personal testimonies of Central American immigrants at the Catholic Teach-in on August 5, 2014, at St. Anthony of Padua School in New Orleans.

Children and families fleeing violence and impunity in Central America this past summer evoked a wide range of responses from the American public. At one end of the spectrum, images of poor migrants clinging to trains headed to the U.S. and hundreds of Latino children sleeping on the floors of Border Patrol processing centers struck fear and anger in the hearts of Americans with nativist tendencies, reactions stoked by fear-mongering talk show hosts and politicians.¹ Protesters in Murrieta, California, and McEllen, Texas, denounced child refugees as invaders and criminals.² Although all children apprehended at the border are screened and vaccinated at state-licensed shelters before being reunited with family members,³ pundits and politicians irresponsibly fanned fears child migrants would spread communicable diseases, including ebola.⁴

On August 1, House Republicans passed a mean-spirited bill with no chance of becoming law to show their constituents they were “doing something” about the border crisis. The Protect the Southwest Border Act of 2014 would gut due process protections that the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008 affords children fleeing

violence and would deport child migrants at the border. In line with Tea Party efforts to dehumanize the children at the heart of the crisis, House Majority Whip Steve Scalise from Louisiana, when defending the bill, likened current immigration policy toward unaccompanied children to practices used by wildlife management programs, i.e. “catch and release,” as though frightened and desperate children were under-sized fish or annoying wild animals.⁵

Thankfully people of faith countered harsh and hateful responses to the border crisis with calls for

compassion, tolerance, and hospitality. Franciscan priest Richard Rohr writes that a central Biblical theme is to call people to encounters with “otherness,” such as the alien, the sinner, the Samaritan, and the Gentile. When there is the encounter with the other, mutuality and presence, giving and receiving—then both are changed and the moment has begun to move toward transformation. Rohr warns that without the other, humans are trapped inside a “perpetual hall of mirrors” that only deepens one’s existing worldviews.⁶

The 150 people who packed the auditorium of St. Anthony of Padua School in New Orleans August 5 to hear testimonies from Central Americans about why they had fled their home countries for an uncertain future in the U.S. clearly chose transformational encounter rather than alienating isolation. At nine tables placed throughout the auditorium, Central American immigrants, assisted by volunteer interpreters and facilitators, shared gut-wrenching stories of terror, loss, hopelessness, and rejection that brought both speakers and listeners to tears. The intent of *The Catholic Teach-In on the Child Migrant Crisis and Its*

Causes was to explain the reasons for the recent border crisis from the point of view of the persons most impacted by the violence and impunity forcing so many children and families to flee their homes—Central Americans themselves.⁷

To provide context to the crisis, before the testimonies began, JSRI Director Fred Kammer, S.J., discussed the Church's teachings on the rights of migrants and refugees. He explained that the dignity and sanctity of the person and the right to life and the conditions worthy of life give rise to the right to migrate. Fr. Kammer was followed by JSRI's new economic policy specialist, Ali Bustamante, who explained how U.S. policies through the years favoring U.S. economic interests over the development of healthy democracies in Latin America have contributed to the crisis.

By all accounts the Teach-In was an extraordinary event: a safe space was created where suffering people opened their hearts to strangers, who in an act of true compassion, listened intently and respectfully, allowing themselves to enter into the suffering of others and be changed in the process.

At one table 13-year-old Michael, from the world's most murderous city not in a war zone—San Pedro Sula, Honduras—tearfully explained how last year armed gang members started coming on to his school's playground to intimidate boys to join their gang and that one of his best friends took his own life rather than join. His 17-year-old sister, Yerlin, became so terrified after being robbed three times by armed assailants that she refused to return to school. When gunmen sprayed their home with bullets last September, their uncle decided to have the children taken to the U.S. where, after a long and frightful journey, they were re-united with their mother and father in New Orleans—whom the children had not seen in over nine years. Michael's mother, Maria, explained, as her son rubbed her face and hair, that, because she could not pay for her son's many medical needs in Honduras, she had to leave him and his sister with her brother. However, she never left her children in her heart—calling them without fail every morning and every evening.

U.S.-born participants described in evaluations how they were affected by the stories they heard: "The first-hand reports were important. Seeing the young man [Michael] break down as he tried to tell his story broke my heart." ... "Listening to the story of Ivan and family [was] overwhelming and humbling to hear. [It] made me sad, angry—wanting to share [their] story." ... "I experienced a little of the pain that the individuals who shared with us have experienced."⁸

Gregory Boyle, S.J., writes in *Tattoos on the Heart* that a new, palpable sense of solidarity among equals, a beloved community, is always the fruit of true compassion.⁹ When I asked Central Americans how it felt to be listened to, their responses reflected the compassion and solidarity they experienced. A 58-year-old woman who had fled Guatemala to escape brutal beatings from her husband said, "I felt very happy and touched because I came to understand that we are not alone as immigrants, that we are a part of all Catholic people." A Nicaraguan woman who had poured her heart out about the agony she suffered having to leave her children behind felt others had put themselves in her place, and she could see they were very moved.¹⁰ Maria, Michael's mother, told me, "We had not had the opportunity to share our story—I was very moved that so many people were interested... I felt supported by everyone there; I felt we were all in solidarity—with me, my child, and my husband."¹¹

Before the final prayer, participants committed to taking the following actions: collecting signatures on a letter calling for a humane response to the border crisis, visiting their congresspersons during the August recess, organizing a Teach-In at another parish, and asking attorney friends to represent children in immigration hearings.

Fr. Boyle writes, "Here is what we seek: a compassion that can stand in awe at what the poor have to carry rather than stand in judgment at how they carry it."¹² The Teach-In became an occasion where such compassion was realized. What more can be done in our churches to melt the margins that keep people apart?

ENDNOTES

- 1 See Michelle Leung, "Conservative media stoke fears about humanitarian crisis causing children to enter U.S.," June 24, 2014, at mediamatters.org/research/2014/06/24/conservative-media-stoke-fears-about-humanitari/199864
- 2 See Elizabeth Findell, "Border Convoy, local activists clash at news conference," August 8, 2014, at m.themonitor.com/news/local/border-convoy-local-activists-clash-at-news-conference/article_c44009a2-1f68-11e4-9935-0017a43b2370.html?mode=jqm
- 3 See "Unaccompanied Children: Health Information for Public Health Partners" on Office of Refugee Resettlement/Department of Health and Human Services website at emergency.cdc.gov/children/pdf/cdc-factsheet-ph-uc-08-01-14-final.pdf
- 4 Mollie Reilly, "Another Congressman Suggests Migrant Children May Have Ebola," *The Huffington Post*, August 4, 2005.
- 5 Bruce Alpert, "Tough GOP immigration bills drawing strong reactions pro and con," *The Times-Picayune*, August 3, 2014.
- 6 Richard Rohr, *Job and the Mystery of Suffering* (New York, New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), p. 157.
- 7 The event was organized by JSRI, Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans, and the Archdiocesan Office of Racial Harmony.
- 8 Evaluations of Catholic Teach-In on Child Migrant Crisis and Its Causes, collected August 5, 2014, on file with author.
- 9 Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* (New York, New York: Free Press, 2010), p. 80.
- 10 From written responses to questionnaire administered August 17, 2014, on file with author.
- 11 Phone interview with author, August 21, 2014.
- 12 *Ibid*, *Tattoos on the Heart*, p. 67.

For copies of material used for the Teach-In, contact Sue Weishar at sweishar@loyno.edu. Also see *Toolkit on Advocacy Rights of Unaccompanied Children and Families Fleeing from Central America* prepared by three Jesuit organizations at ignatiansolidarity.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Toolkit_for_Advocating_for_the_rights_of_unaccompanied_children_FINAL.pdf