From the front porch of Casa Encuentro in El Paso, Texas, you can see Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, about a mile away. The thin ribbon of water that separates these two cities and the countries of the United States and Mexico—the Rio Grande—is only discernable at turns in the river where sunlight reflects on the water. A large red X sculpture is visible to the southeast, but from the vantage point of Casa Encuentro, it is impossible to tell if the structure is in Mexico or the United States (it’s in Mexico). On the immaculate streets surrounding Casa Encuentro—where Spanish is heard more often than English, adobe style homes feature frescos of Our Lady of Guadalupe, and big American cars rev their motors to ascend the steep hills—one gets a sense of being in two worlds, two cultures, two realities at the same time and in the same place.

Casa Encuentro is the home of the Encuentro Project, a new collaborative and inter-congregational ministry involving the Jesuits of El Paso, the Marist Brothers of the United States and Mexico, the Hope Border Institute, and numerous other organizations on both sides of the border. The project, which is the vision of JSRI Associate Fr. Rafael Garcia, S.J., launched its ministry of encounter in December 2018, drawing its inspiration from the call of Pope Francis for a “culture of encounter” to address the fear and indifference that marginalizes migrants and refugees. By offering programming and lodging for border immersion experiences to groups from high schools, universities, and parishes, the Encuentro Project aims to help participants gain a greater understanding of the complex history and present reality of migration in the El Paso—Ciudad Juarez border community and inspire participants to challenge the borders in their own communities that push immigrants to the margins.

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Immersion programs, typically four to six days in length, are tailored to the needs and ages of participants. Each Encuentro Project experience typically includes:

- Direct work and encounter opportunities with asylum seekers, migrants, or refugees, either in a local emergency shelter or detention center, or through the education and social service programs offered by El Sagrado Corazon, the Jesuit parish in El Paso;
- Education in Catholic Social Teaching on migration;
- Discussion of the push and pull factors causing migration from Central America and Mexico to the United States;
- Site visits in El Paso and Las Cruces, and if desired, to organizations serving Ciudad Juarez residents across the US-Mexico border; and
- Evening reflections, prayer, and community living.

Fr. Garcia also serves as the Director of the Encuentro Project. Under his leadership the Project is deeply impacting participants’ attitudes toward and understanding of the harsh realities faced by migrants at the southern border of the United States through experiences like the following:

- **Visiting “the wall.”** Participants can reach through the huge steel slats separating the United States from Mexico and shake hands with residents from Ciudad Juarez, who themselves may be permanently separated from family members by the very same wall. In a recent excursion to the border wall by students from Jesuit College Preparatory School in Dallas, Texas, children from Ciudad Juarez passed their puppies to the Jesuit Prep students through the slats in the wall that they themselves are forbidden to pass through.

- **Sharing Eucharist with men and women being held at ICE’s El Paso immigrant detention center.** Sue Weishar, Migration Specialist for JSRI, describes the significance of this encounter for her:

  The harsh bright lights and the metal everything décor of the prison cafeteria were in stark contrast to Fr. Rafa’s homily on the tender mercy and infinite love of God. While serving communion to the women, whose painful journeys to this sorrowful place I could only imagine, I experienced clearly and profoundly how the Eucharist—no matter border walls, prison bars, or other artificial barriers—united us as we became what we received: the Body of Christ.

Internationally renowned author and speaker Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM has observed, “when we receive and empathize with the face of the ‘other’ (especially the suffering face), it leads to transformation of our whole being. It creates a moral demand on our heart that is far more compelling than the Ten Commandments written on stone or paper.”

The Encuentro Project seeks to provide many more people the transformative experience of encounter. For additional information and to inquire about Encuentro Project border immersion trips, please contact Fr. Garcia at encuentroproject@gmail.org or 505-288-9552.

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THE MISSION OF THE JESUIT SOCIAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE

The Jesuit Social Research Institute works to transform the Gulf South through action research, analysis, education, and advocacy on the core issues of poverty, race, and migration. The Institute is a collaboration of Loyola University New Orleans and the Society of Jesus rooted in the faith that does justice.