

Religious Groups plan 2003 Border Pilgrimage: A Journey of Hope and Life Along the U.S. – Mexico Border

From February 17-20, representatives of national and local religious organizations gathered in Tucson, Arizona to discuss plans for an October 2003 pilgrimage along the Mexico/U.S. border. The meeting was convened by a group of faith-based activists who are working to develop a national solidarity movement around the issue of undocumented economic migration. The national religious community is particularly drawn to the issue of the deaths of migrants crossing into the United States. Since the 1994 implementation of the costly Operations Gatekeeper and Hold the Line, aimed at closing off traditional migrant crossing points at Tijuana/San Diego and El Paso/Juarez, migrant deaths have risen dramatically. The interdiction programs have led to the re-direction of migrant flows through more remote and dangerous desert regions. In total, even the most conservative estimates indicate that 2,000 migrants have died on the U.S. side of the border since 1995.

At a May 2002 strategy meeting, this group decided to plan a border-long pilgrimage as a way to call national attention to the human rights crisis along the border and to engage local faith communities in action to address it. The recent joint pastoral letter issued by the Mexican and U.S. Catholic Bishops regarding the migratory relationship between the two countries has given energy to the emerging national movement of faith-based organizations concerned with migration and economic justice.

Many of the people involved in organizing this effort were involved in the sanctuary movement, and they note a number of parallels between the current political environment and that of the 1980s, when the sanctuary movement was born. Today, as in the 1980s, there is little hope for short-term political change that would alleviate the human suffering brought on by U.S. policy decisions. Growing numbers of ordinary people throughout the country feel themselves increasingly alienated by the Bush administration's extreme isolationist rhetoric – just as many did in the 1980s throughout the Reagan administration. In midst of the polarized Cold War context, sanctuary movement organizers and leaders brought the human stories of Central Americans fleeing for their lives from U.S.-funded conflicts to average “people in the pews” in the U.S. Helping ordinary citizens understand the human realities – and human costs – of current U.S. economic, immigration, and border policy regimes is a central goal for the pilgrimage organizers.

However, pilgrimage organizers acknowledge that the policy message behind current human stories is in some ways a more difficult one to translate than it was in the 1980s, when undocumented border crossers were political refugees fleeing brutal civil wars. Today's undocumented immigrants have been stripped of their ability to lead dignified lives in their countries of origin by a set of complex international and domestic economic policy decisions over which they have no control. Immigrants crossing the border illegally today understand the risks associated with their journey, as well as the hardships they will face as undocumented workers in the U.S. However, they continue to come in

greater and greater numbers every year (in spite of stepped-up border control strategies) because they don't see a future for themselves or their families in their own countries.

Pilgrimage organizers hope that the border can serve as a window onto a system that has roots and repercussions far beyond the borderlands. The horrific deaths along the U.S./Mexico border are one manifestation of a set of regional economic and migration policies that have tremendous human costs for communities throughout North and Central America. These costs extend from Mexico's southern border, which is becoming increasingly militarized and dangerous for Central American and extra-regional migrants, through communities of origin, where families experience a loss of hope, displacement, and separation, and finally to destination points in the U.S., where undocumented workers live in marginalized situations without legal stability. Next year will mark the tenth anniversary of NAFTA and the tenth anniversary of the border crackdown efforts, which could represent an educational/organizing opportunity for advocates to highlight the connection between the two.

At the February meeting, participants developed the following plan for the pilgrimage:

On Monday, October 27, 2003 two groups will leave simultaneously from San Diego and Brownsville and will begin traveling towards El Paso, picking up people along the way, and staging events in cities along the border. Planners anticipate hosting events in the following communities between October 27 and 30:

San Diego/Calexico
Yuma
Tucson
Nogales, AZ/Nogales, Sonora
Douglas/Agua Prieta
Las Cruces
Brownsville/Matamoros
McAllen/Reynosa
Laredo/Nuevo Laredo
San Antonio

Both groups will arrive in El Paso on October 31 for a weekend conference that will include cultural events, a panel of migrant speakers, a series of workshops, and a binational mass on Sunday, November 2.

For more information on this event, please contact West Cosgrove with the Maryknoll Border Team in El Paso by phone at (915) 543-6771 or email at Mklborder@aol.com.