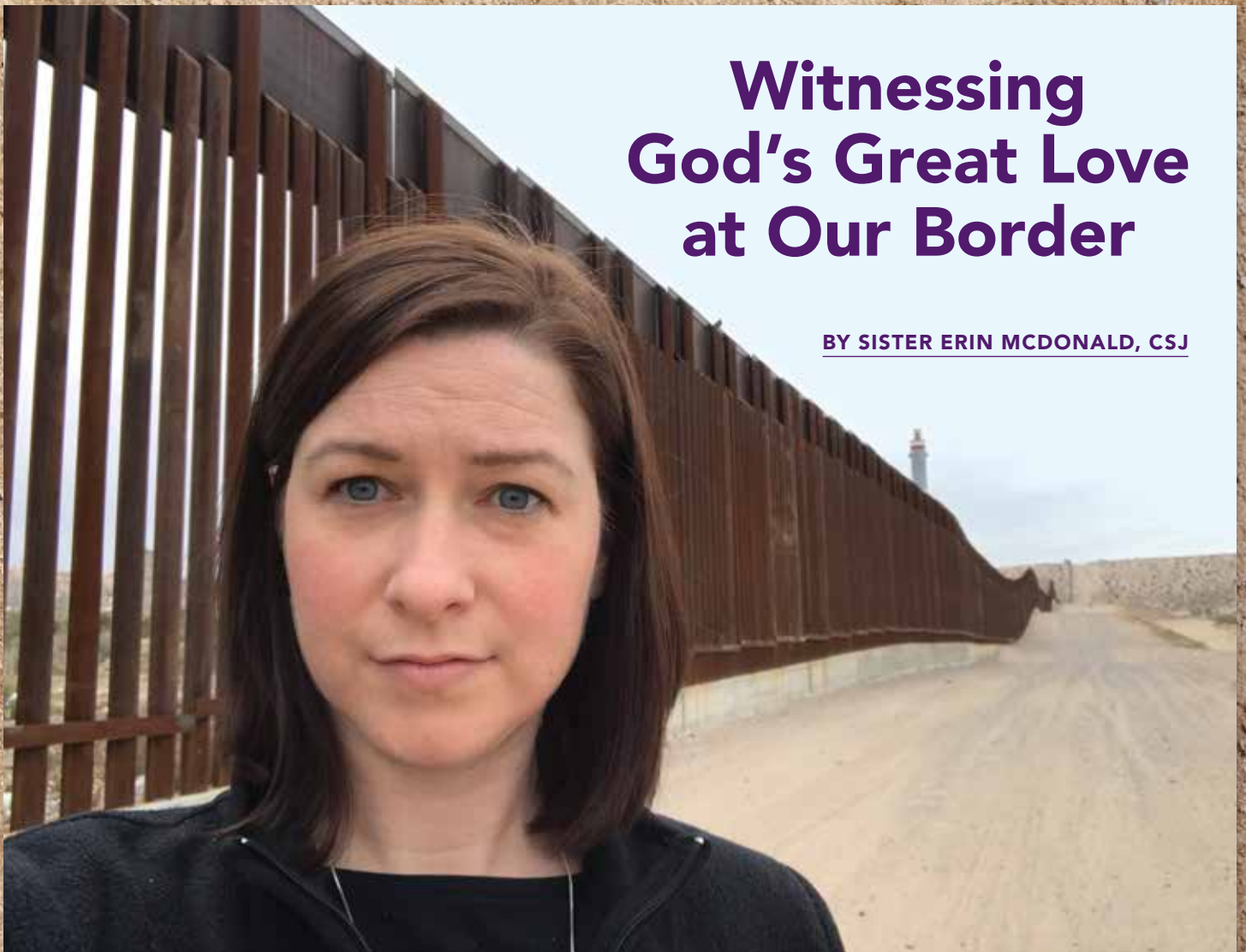


# JOURNEY OF ENCOUNTER

## Witnessing God's Great Love at Our Border

BY SISTER ERIN MCDONALD, CSJ



The moment had arrived. The bus full of refugees was here. I instantly felt anxious. I don't speak Spanish and it was my first day. The doors opened and a sea of sullen and worn faces filed in to the shelter. The local ICE detention facility had released another large group of asylum seekers. Some were limping from sore feet. Some looked terrified and exhausted. Some were children whimpering for a morsel of food. One woman carried a child who looked so sick, and lay so limply in her arms; I thought the toddler might be dead.

I stood in the shelter's hallway welcoming nearly 100 asylum seekers from Central America. Tears welled up in my eyes as I tried to muster a few humble words of welcome in Spanish. I wasn't prepared for the overwhelming feelings of suffering that wafted into the room with the road weary refugees. This simple moment of encounter had unexpectedly pierced my heart. Perhaps it was the sheer number of desperate people filing off

the bus. Perhaps it was their enormous need for basic items like food, water, a shower, and a safe place. Perhaps it was an insatiable sense of our suffering hearts realizing we are walking this journey of life together. Perhaps it was a compelling moment of compassion like St. Veronica experienced as she stepped forward to wipe the brow of Jesus. Perhaps my own heart was moved to try to comfort these suffering people of God.

It was December, the week before Christmas, when Christians are praying with the story of Mary and Joseph seeking shelter, warmth, and protection. The time when we display our nativity sets to remind us of the baby Jesus born to parents who feared persecution. This is when my students and I were in El Paso, Texas, for a service immersion experience. Here we were living members of the modern day nativity scene.



► *Group Photo. Erin with Bishop Mark Seitz, Bishop of El Paso, and well known for having testified in Congress on behalf of migrants. He has also written a very powerful pastoral letter, "Sorrow and Mourning Flee Away," about migration.*



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The issues of our immigration system are complex and the needs prolific but the call to compassion and love is clear.



As a social worker who has spent nearly a decade working with refugees and asylum seekers, I have an understanding of our country's immigration system and the shattering experiences of displaced persons. Yet my time in El Paso stretched me in new ways spiritually, emotionally, and professionally.

We partnered with a Jesuit ministry on the border, The Encuentro Project, which translated means

“encounter.” We were on a journey of encounter. We encountered migrants to understand what forced them to seek refuge in the U.S. We encountered Border Patrol Agents to understand their experience of securing our border from drugs, gangs, and traffickers. We encountered immigration lawyers, social service agencies, and local faith leaders, like Bishop Mark Seitz, to understand from their perspective. We encountered Christ during the Christmas Masses in the local immigrant detention facility, where dozens of men and women mourned separation from their families or the death of loved ones in their home country. One woman, tears running down her cheeks, spoke of the enormous grief that shattered her heart when she lost five children from gang violence in Honduras. She looked at us and whispered through her sobs, “What wouldn't you do to try to save your sixth child?”

These encounters led me to a deeper experience of the Gospel message of love, unity, and reconciliation. The issues of our immigration system are complex and the needs prolific but the call to compassion and love is clear. The Christian call to uphold human dignity and kindness in the context of so many men, women, and children who are desperately seeking help and protection is clear. People are suffering. We have the capacity to alleviate some of their suffering.

◀ *Vania Noguez, senior at the University of Detroit Mercy, talking to migrants through the wall.*





▲ A University of Detroit Mercy student coloring with children at the Loretto-Nazareth Shelter for migrants.

As a Sister of St. Joseph, I am called to be a catalyst for unifying love and reconciliation and as a woman religious I must always strive to be a prophetic voice; a voice which speaks truth to power and constantly strives to point to the reign of God among us.

Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso in his a pastoral letter, *Sorrow and Mourning Flee Away*, wrote, “Since Jesus announced Good News to the poor, our Church has been called to stand with the suffering. The Church must illuminate the challenges of the moment with the light of the Gospel, pointing out what reflects the kingdom of God and what does not. As I write this letter to you, we are living in trying times as a country and migrants

are living through a dark night of fear and uncertainty.” We must not lose our humanity in the midst of political power struggles or lose sight of our Christian call to comfort the poor and suffering. We are one human family and we suffer together.

My encounter with the people of El Paso taught me immigration reform and border security are important and complicated, yet we must not

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lose sight of our brothers and sisters in Christ who are knocking at our door. Like the inn keepers of Mary and Joseph’s time, we have the choice to open the door and welcome the stranger. The prophetic words of Dorothy Day remind us that “the Gospel takes away our right forever to discriminate between the deserving and the undeserving poor.”

After we settled our new arrivals at the shelter, I was holding a child in my arms, hoping his fever would break and his dehydration eased. I desperately prayed he wouldn’t die as one child on the border had in the days before our arrival. Holding this child in my arms I encountered the places of suffering in my own heart. The places that make me feel I am not enough, the places where I struggle to fully embrace the love of God. Holding this tiny sick body in my arms I felt I was holding the suffering of the whole world. Like the baby Jesus lying in a manger, this child held for me the weight of all humanity.

As tears filled my eyes, I whispered the words of Warsan Shire, “Where does it hurt? And it answered, Everywhere, everywhere, everywhere.” This child held the entire world in his heart and I encountered the Great Love of God in my own. I am forever changed by my experience of encounter at the border, and I pray for the courage to always be a prophetic voice of this great love. ■