News



Laura Guzman, 6, who is part of a caravan of thousands of migrants from Central America trying to reach the United States, walks under clothing Nov. 27 at a temporary camp in Tijuana, Mexico. (CNS/Lucy Nicholson, Reuters)

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Laredo's Bishop James Tamayo is calling church leaders and lay faithful to "extend the compassion of Christ" to those who come to Catholic churches in need.

Tamayo leads the youngest diocese in Texas and the U.S. The south Texas city of Laredo borders the Mexican city of Nuevo Laredo, and local Catholic leaders are "preparing to help in any way ... should the caravan come to our doorsteps," he said.

His comments come as tensions with tear gas and violence rise on the far west part of the U.S.-Mexico border in Baja California. Thousands of people with a caravan from Central America began arriving in Tijuana, Mexico, Nov. 13, and more continue to arrive.

Tamayo said his diocesan and social services staff have met with local and national border officials to ensure that the position of the Catholic Church on immigration is known.

The government knows of the church's respect of the nation's laws, he said, "but also of our desire if some (migrants) come in need of health care, if some come to try to reunite with family members, we want to help them through the legal process or if they're at our door and they need food, they need medical care and attention, they want to tell their story and seek asylum from violence and from the governmental structures of their own country, they should be heard."

Respect is key to the process of dialogue with local and national officials, Tamayo told the Texas Catholic Herald, newspaper of the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston.

"We need to respect them because they have policies and guidelines," he continued. "When we can tell them we know what you must do or what your policies state, we need to help you to see where the church stands too. We respect all of that but in turn we ask you to come to know us. Our church is composed of the people of the community."

Tamayo said church leaders tell border officials that "as you stand at the border following your law of safeguarding the frontier, we stand too at a border to see that everyone that comes, knocks, that travels across or desires to travel across is respected, is assisted with their questions, their concerns, their immediate needs."

Still, with this "there is a spirit of collaboration," he said.

In Brownsville, Bishop Daniel Flores has directly dealt with the federal government.

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At a recent lecture in Houston, Flores described the U.S. government's attempt to survey land owned by the Diocese of Brownsville with goals to eventually build a wall there. While he denied the request and the government has since filed suit, Flores said he had several "amicable discussions" with federal officials.

"I have great respect for border security agents," he said. "I know many of them personally. Still, I decided not to consent to this request on the grounds that it limits the freedom of the church and is a counter-sign to her mission."

A border wall is not an intrinsic evil, but it is a prudential social disaster, according to Flores.

"I am a realist," he said. "The government has virtually unlimited resources, the Diocese of Brownsville does not. If in the end the wall is not built on our property, then we have defended our principled position; but, if in the end the barrier is built; it will not be because the church signed a permission. This, would, in fact, speak for itself."

Of the caravan of asylum seekers, Flores said that "to seek asylum at terrible moments of life is a human right recognized by the laws of the United States as well as of the Republic of Mexico. To ask for asylum is not a crime, and ought to be an orderly process and proceed in a way respecting the laws of each nation."

"Ours is the poverty of a discourse that is governed by mutually exclusive and insufficiently nuanced narratives," he said. "This is abundantly evident in the current discussion about the 'caravan.' Are they a band of marauders, or are they the poor fleeing from marauders? Realistically, I have little reason to doubt that criminal

elements infiltrate caravans of immigrants who are in the great majority the poor, who are themselves fleeing from criminal elements controlling vast parts of their native countries."

But there are "just ways" governments can collaborate on to differentiate people and families escaping from "humanly intolerable circumstances" and those "criminal elements that seek to infiltrate and manipulate the vulnerable condition of the immigrant."

Bishop Joe Vásquez of Austin, who is the chair of the U.S. bishops' migration committee, recently told another Houston audience that caring for immigrants is "rooted in the Gospel" and part of the original religious identity of Catholics. He also strongly faulted the polarized political climate for blurring Church teaching on immigration and dividing God's people.



Volunteers hand out coffee in late October to Honduran migrants at a Catholic church in Tecun Uman, Guatemala, near the border with Mexico. The migrants were part of a caravan trying to reach the U.S. (CNS/Ueslei Marcelino, Reuters)

"As Catholics, we must respect, love and protect the immigrant," Vasquez said, noting that he was not speaking politically but as a pastor concerned for persons and the well-being of souls.

He described immigration as "one of the most critical challenges the church faces in our hemisphere," with millions of vulnerable people on the move, forced from their homelands by violence and extreme poverty. Millions more live amid crippling fear in the U.S. with serious consequences that Vásquez said he has witnessed in his own Austin Diocese.

He said an ignorance of church teaching and deep political ideologies are creating hostility around the issue and have cowed some in church leadership from speaking out; nonetheless, he said, "We cannot allow the world to dictate to the church how she understands herself, her role, her mission."

"We need to help our people and our leaders to examine their conscience in light of these principles of Catholic social teaching," Vásquez said. "Dialogue is needed. Very, very clearly it is evident that dialogue is not taking place."

Vásquez said immigration issues the church is currently working on include advocating for immigration reform; a permanent solution for the status of "Dreamers," as beneficiaries of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program are known, and of other individuals brought into the U.S. illegally as children; and an end to family separation at the border.

"We must remember that they are human beings that are in many instances escaping persecution, targeted by violence and running away from threats," he said. "We must help them to be treated humanely."

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Ramos is a staff writer and designer for the Texas Catholic Herald, newspaper of the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston.