News



U.S. President Donald Trump delivers an address Jan. 8 televised to the nation from his desk in the Oval Office at the White House in Washington. (CNS/Reuters/Carlos Barria)



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No sooner had President Donald Trump finished his Jan. 8 nine-minute speech, his first such event televised in prime time from the Oval Office, about what he called a "crisis" at the border, than Catholic groups and others began tearing apart his arguments.

In email statements, via Twitter, in Facebook posts that cascaded overnight, they denounced his words as incendiary and untruthful and called on him and Congress to find different solutions to the country's immigration woes, particularly ones that do not involve building a wall and include instead more compassion.

Trump said the wall, whose lack of funding triggered the ongoing partial government shutdown that began at midnight Dec. 22, was necessary to stop drugs and violent immigrants from coming into the country, which he called a "humanitarian and security crisis at our southern border."

"Over the years, thousands of Americans have been brutally killed by those who illegally entered our country and thousands more lives will be lost if we don't act right now," he said.

On drugs, he said: "Our southern border is a pipeline for vast quantities of illegal drugs, including meth, heroin, cocaine and fentanyl. Every week, 300 of our citizens are killed by heroin alone, 90 percent of which floods across from our southern border."

Fact checkers from various news organizations quickly pointed out research, including a study from the journal Criminology, that showed "undocumented immigration does not increase violence," that most drugs come to the U.S. at already existing border crossings, so more wall- or barrier-building wouldn't stop their transport. The Center for Migration Studies, a think-tank in New York connected

to the Congregation of the Missionaries of St. Charles, known popularly as the Scalabrinians, disseminated information from one of its studies in 2016 that showed the number of "undocumented in the nation had dropped to 10.8 million, a new low."

On Twitter, the Sisters of Mercy quickly responded: "Tonight's speech by President Trump was another, in a long list of speeches, rooted in untruths, fear and division."

They noted that the speech came as the Catholic Church in the United States marked National Migration Week, Jan. 6-12, to support and pray for immigrants, refugees, victims and survivors of human trafficking.



Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-New York, and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-California, pose for photographers Jan. 8 on Capitol Hill in Washington after concluding their joint response to President Donald Trump's prime-time address. (CNS/Reuters/Jonathan Ernst)

"It is particularly troubling that a speech of this nature comes while the church recognizes #NationalMigrationWeek, a moment to reflect upon the desperate and

harrowing circumstances confronting migrants, immigrants, and refugees," the Mercy Sisters tweeted after the speech.

"Neither the continued government shutdown nor a declaration of national emergency aimed at funding a wall will correct years of failed U.S. immigration policy or ameliorate the U.S.'s role in the root causes of migration," the Mercy Sisters wrote in a response published quickly following the speech. "Make no mistake, there is a humanitarian crisis on the border, but it is one of the Trump administration's own making. One where asylum-seekers are forced to wait in dangerous and unhealthy conditions for weeks while their asylum claims are assessed and decided."

The following morning, without referencing the speech, a Texas border bishop, Brownsville's Daniel Flores — who is facing a dispute with government officials seeking to survey church property to build a wall on — tweeted that "mothers and children are fleeing the very criminal elements that we ourselves recognize represent a mortal danger. Are we not capable of sustaining a response that both protects the vulnerable and restrains the menace?"

More directly, Donald Kerwin, executive director of the Center for Migration Studies, urged the president and lawmakers to look at the conditions of persecution and violence in the Northern Triangle countries of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. That, he said, is where this administration and Congress should focus, and instead fix the causes that drive the displacement of people.

"A series of measures designed to deter these vulnerable populations from fleeing their countries, including family separation, mandatory detention, zero tolerance and denial of entry at the border are undermining their legal and human rights, guaranteed under both domestic and international law," Kerwin said.

"They are handing themselves over to Border Patrol agents in search of protection, not trying to enter the country illegally," he said. "The administration and Congress should act to end these inhumane policies and provide protection to vulnerable women and children."

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Instead of shutting down the government over a wall, Kerwin continued, Trump and Congress should enact a legislative package providing permanent status to those

benefiting from the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival and Temporary Protected Status programs, "immigrant populations who have built equities in our nation."

But neither the wall nor any other proposals to curb immigration set forth by immigration supporters seemed to gain traction after the speech. As the president and lawmakers met Jan. 9 to try to find common ground, reports trickled out about what was a failed effort.

Democrats said Trump slammed his hands on a table and walked out during the talks. Late in the afternoon of Jan. 9, the president tweeted his account of his meeting with top Democrats, Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer of New York and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi of California.

"Just left a meeting with Chuck and Nancy, a total waste of time," Trump tweeted. "I asked what is going to happen in 30 days if I quickly open things up, are you going to approve Border Security which includes a Wall or Steel Barrier? Nancy said, NO. I said bye-bye, nothing else works!"