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A U.S. Customs and Border Patrol agent travels along the border fence March 28 between U.S. and Mexico near Tecate, California. (CNS/Reuters/Mike Blake)

by NCR Editorial Staff

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As profoundly deficient as President Donald Trump might be as an elected public official, he is equally masterful as a public illusionist, scattering flashy and disruptive distractions about the landscape, deflecting attention from serious matters. And nowhere is that skill more apparent than with the issue of the southern border and the tens of thousands of migrants, including many families with children, seeking asylum.

Set aside for this moment the long, systemic ills in Central America — and the United States' well-documented role in creating those problems — that fuel the migration. For years, they've been amply documented in these pages. This administration has neither the tolerance nor the attention span to consider even that recent history.

Further, such considerations wouldn't fit the simplistic dualisms of senior adviser and "border hawk" Stephen Miller, one of the few to have survived a series of White House purges and who has Trump's ear on immigration issues.

What we're experiencing today is administration-generated chaos.

The wall. A government shutdown over funding of the wall. Separated families. Children in cages. A presidentially declared national emergency. An emergency so dire we'll shut down the border. Oops, commerce complains. We'll hold the border closing until after the election. Refugees have to remain in Mexico. Except a federal court overturns that policy. Maybe we'll begin separating families again.

In the meantime, we need even more distractions because people are beginning to notice the grief and suffering. Fire Homeland Security head Kirstjen Nielsen. Hire more cronies for border security. And the numbers at the border keep rising. Anyone have a workable policy?

In any other context, this might be a comedy sketch. But lives are at stake, children have died, families are desperate, and serious and sober work goes on that belies the xenophobic and poisonous rhetoric of Miller and Trump.

While the administration relies on a week-to-week hysteria, a longer perspective is illuminating. Numbers of undocumented immigrants showing up at official ports of entry and between have increased and totaled 103,492 in March. But as reported by NCR Bertelsen intern Maria Benevento, who has been diligently following border

issues for months, that number is not unprecedented. Undocumented immigrants numbered more than one million a year 19 times between 1983 and 2006, with a high of more than 1.6 million in 2000. It was only in 2010 that numbers began to consistently drop below 500,000.

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That's reality. There is a humanitarian crisis brewing at the border, but it has nothing to do with Trump's characterization of dangerous criminals and drug dealers. It has to do with a yearning by a lot of oppressed and frightened people for the same opportunities that drove our ancestors to these shores, many of whom did not first study U.S. immigration law.

The difference today from years past — and where a record is being established — is in the number of families seeking asylum, where once the migration consisted primarily of individual men. It isn't that the U.S. does not have the capacity to deal with families (Trump's absurd assertion that the "country is full" notwithstanding); it is that developing such an infrastructure has not been a priority.

The staff of Catholic Legal Immigration Network Inc., or CLINIC, and local groups affiliated with the Catholic Church have well outpaced their capacities, stretching themselves beyond limit to provide legal services, consultation and aid at the border.

Catholic bishops along the border have also been working tirelessly to both combat the Trump administration narrative and provide care, compassion and on-the-ground assistance. They could use a great deal more support.

One of the sad realizations in all of this is that elections do have consequences. That is certainly apparent in the undisciplined and mindless lack of rationale in the Trump administration regarding the border. It is also apparent at the episcopal level. It is unfortunate that the leaders of the U.S. Catholic conference have been relatively missing — save for a few press releases and endorsements of legislative initiatives — from the fray. It is depressingly clear that they have been unable to free the conference, so long beholden to Republican Party ideologues, from that grip.

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Where is the episcopal outrage over separated families and caged children? Where is the insistent teaching from the pulpits about the evident life issues involved? Where is the invocation of the strong and consistent language of Pope Francis regarding immigrants? Where are the Fortnight for Freedom advocates? Where are the episcopal letters to parishes, the bulletin inserts and the bus caravans to Washington or to the border?

From his initial descent down a gilded escalator into the political arena, Trump defined his candidacy — and ultimately his presidency — by advancing an inhumane and utterly incorrect characterization of immigrants of every kind, with a particularly vicious assault on Mexicans. He later learned to add Central Americans to his screeds.

His policies have nothing to do with protecting anyone or anything beyond his vaunted political base. He plays to the lowest instincts imaginable, floats above reason on a cloud of fear and likely has no real appreciation of the level of cruelty he inflicts on some of the hemisphere's most vulnerable.

Silence, bishops and fellow Catholics, gives consent.

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