News



Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso, Texas, shares a smile with a Honduran girl, Cesia, as he walks and prays with a group of migrants at the Lerdo International Bridge in El Paso June 27, 2019. The migrants were seeking asylum in the U.S. (CNS/Jose Luis Gonzalez, Reuters)



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Washington — June 28, 2019

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Bishop Mark Seitz of the U.S. border Diocese of El Paso, Texas, walked and prayed with a group of migrants at the Lerdo International Bridge in El Paso June 27 as they sought asylum in the U.S.

Cameras surrounded him, as some individuals nearby held large posters with the faces of children who have recently died on the border.

The El Paso bishop then accompanied migrants to Ciudad Juárez in Mexico, where they met with leaders of the Diocese of Ciudad Juárez and visited Casa del Migrante, a diocesan migrant shelter. He issued a statement, which he provided June 27 to Catholic News Service.

"As a Catholic and Christian leader on the border, I am often called to be a doctor of the soul," he said, delivering the statement in English and Spanish. "Standing here at the U.S.-Mexico border, how do we begin to diagnose the soul of our country?

"A government and society which view fleeing children and families as threats; a government which treats children in U.S. custody worse than animals; a government and society who turn their backs on pregnant mothers, babies and families and make them wait in Ciudad Juárez without a thought to the crushing consequences on this challenged city. ... This government and this society are not well."

He said that in the U.S., we'd like to think that prejudice and intolerance are problems of the past, but the present shows that's not the case.

"We have found a new acceptable group to treat as less than human, to look down upon and to fear. And should they speak another language or are brown or black ... well, it is that much more easy to stigmatize them."

Seitz spoke with and prayed with Fr. Javier Calvillo, director of the Casa del Migrante shelter, which receives immigrants turned away on the Mexico side. Migrants turned away have to stay on the other side until U.S. courts can hear their asylum case, as part of the "Remain in Mexico" policy implemented by the Trump administration.

The El Paso bishop accompanied immigrants from Honduras, including families with cognitive disabilities, said Dylan Corbett, executive director of El Paso's Hope Border Institute.

"Why can't we put ourselves in their shoes?" Seitz asked in his statement. "Because we have decided they are not our neighbors, we have decided that they are aliens and illegals. We think these parents simply have no right to save their children from violence or malnutrition.

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"They have no right to a job or to support their families. They have no right to reunite with family," he continued. "For this heartsick government and society, these people should have stayed home, given into hopelessness and watched helplessly as their children suffer."

The bishop participated in the event during a week that has seen much outrage in the country — and the world — after the publication of photos of a father and daughter who drowned in the Rio Grande River trying to cross the border into the U.S. and reports of deplorable conditions in immigration centers where children are detained.

"Would we rather they die on the banks of the Rio Grande than trouble us with their presence?" he asked. "But we have not suffered the mistreatment meted out to them by those who represent our country. We haven't really felt their hunger and cold. And it is not our children who will be denied food, water and tenderness tonight. We Americans need our hearts checked. Our hearts have grown too cold and too hard and that bodes ill for the health of our nation.

"In the America of today, is there no more Golden Rule? Have we forgotten the lessons of Scripture? Have we forgotten the commandment to love? Have we forgotten God? But here on the border, he knocks," Seitz said. "In the struggle for hope and freedom and family, he knocks. In the lives of Jakelin and Felipe and Oscar and Valeria, he knocks. In our neighbors here today, he knocks. He knocks. He knocks. He knocks."

Before he began his walk on the bridge, he told Catholic News Service in a phone interview June 27 that wanted to call attention "to what's being done in the shadows" every day, as people seeking refuge are forced into dangerous places such as Ciudad Juárez.

"What's problematic is the way we're treating people fleeing for their lives," he told CNS. "We force them back into dangerous places with limited resources, where they're going to have to stay a year or more."

He said he was not scared to undertake the action on the bridge because he has seen the effects of the policies as centers in El Paso are seeing fewer people trying to cross at ports of entry, legally asking for asylum, but essentially denied the opportunity because of the long wait and are instead taking dangerous paths, such as the one that 25-year-old Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez took with his 23-month-old daughter, Valeria, and one that led to their deaths.

"They're taking more and more dangerous paths," he said. "We've already witnessed the death of nine people last week, or so, in attempts to cross. That's so awful. How can we sit back and say 'that situation is too bad, that's the way it is.' We can't. We have to try and do something and shine a light ... on this inappropriate system that is really causing the death of people who are in the first place, simply fleeing for their lives."