Opinion

News



People from the U.S. and Mexico take part in a "posada," the commemoration of Mary and Joseph's search for shelter in this Dec. 20, 2015 photo taken in Nogales, Mexico. The annual Nogales event held by the Kino Border Initiative and Dioceses Without Borders reflected on the struggles of migrants and migrant families. (CNS photo/Nancy Wiechec)



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During Advent, all along both sides of the U.S.–Mexico border, families celebrate the popular posadas tradition. For nine evenings, families and friends reenact the search of Joseph and the pregnant Blessed Mother for lodging only to experience rejection. This practice is grounded in a fleeting reference in the Gospel of Luke whereby Mary laid the baby in a manger "because there was no place for them in the inn." (Luke 2:7) The procession of families and neighbors is led by statues of Joseph and Mary or by youth dressed in costumes as the holy couple followed by the faithful praying the rosary and singing special hymns. They visit three neighborhood homes asking for posada, lodging. The pilgrims are rejected in the first two homes, but welcomed in the last home where the fiesta begins and all sing "Jesus is welcomed into our heart."

Today this posada tradition has special significance for our church because this same pattern of rejection is being lived by the over 55,000 refugees and asylum seekers who are literally knocking at our nation's door. At points of entry like the Paso *del Norte International Bridge they* ask for entrance, but our doors are shut to them. The "remain in Mexico" policy is forcing these vulnerable travelers to wait in dangerous Mexican border cities as their immigration cases are played out, and thousands more wait before they can even file an asylum claim.

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These migrants, refugees and asylum seekers are forced to flee and seek a better life for their families because of violence, hunger, death threats, extreme poverty and severe climate and natural catastrophes in their countries of origin. Visiting the refugees at the Paso *del Norte International Bridge*, I saw individuals and families living on the streets with plastic makeshift tents as homes. I witnessed children without shoes, a baby with a high fever, and many others sick and suffering from the cold and hunger. One father with his wife and two sons told me that he left his home

because thugs put a gun to his head demanding more money than he had. They told him they would return later for more money and if he did not provide it they would kill his family. He fled to the U.S. and was turned back at the border bridge. For three months the family has been waiting in inclement weather to file a claim for asylum. The father told me, "It hurts me to see my family suffer living here on the streets, but I had no choice. We will endure what we have to. God help us!" As a nation, we can surely do better in the way we treat those looking for room at the inn.



Kenia Salas, playing the part of Mary, looks out into a crowd during a binational posada Dec. 20, 2015, in Nogales, Mexico. The commemoration of Mary and Joseph's search for shelter before the birth of Christ was held by the Kino Border Initiative and Dioceses Without Borders to reflect on the struggles of migrants and migrant families. (CNS photo/Nancy Wiechec)

The border wall and unjust immigration policies signal, "You are not welcome in the U.S., in our country." These racist policies continue to cause suffering and death by targeting our migrant communities. Sadly, xenophobia and hostility to immigrants have always been a defining character of our country, we default to an excuse that

there is "no place for them in the inn." For this reason, for us to celebrate the posadas is an act of resistance and protest against racism and xenophobic policies and actions. Posadas call us to practice a profound solidarity that embraces the stranger as brother and sister worthy of being treated with dignity and respect. Posadas can be an example of subverting racism through solidarity, a solidarity experienced in accompanying the vulnerable Holy Family through rejection to welcome.

Solidarity takes us into a deeper place by getting us out of our comfort zones, out of the way we are used to thinking about the poor and marginalized. Solidarity invites us to enter into the lives of those who struggle by making their suffering and pain our own. You suffer therefore I suffer! Real solidarity allows their struggles, their stories, their dreams and their plights to penetrate deeply into our very soul. In effect our lives are transformed when we recognize that those who are poor, vulnerable and struggling are our teachers for justice — with a claim on our hearts and resources.

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>
> —Arturo José Bañuelas
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A real encounter of solidarity is mutual, and in this mutuality we become part of each other's lives. We learn from each other, and in the process we both become more fully human, more able to flourish together. These moments of transformation awaken us to each other and mystically open us to the Divine all around us and in us. Such solidarity requires commitments to foster just immigration reform, to be grateful for the gifts immigrants bring to our communities, to confront honestly a racist dark side of our national history. Solidarity lived in compassion manifests when we collectively embrace each other, especially the stranger, with dignity and respect, when we welcome a new moment of incarnate love into our lives.



Kino Teens from Arizona act out the tragedies that can befall migrants as the students take part in a binational posada in Nogales, Mexico, Dec. 20, 2015. (CNS photo/Nancy Wiechec)

Posadas in Advent, as an act of resistance, help us to see the world as it is, how it could be and how it will be. The fiesta that comes at the end of each evening, where the Holy Family and pilgrims find welcome and lodging at last, eschatologically anticipates that time when hate, fear and racism will be overcome by justice. Each night the posada celebrates a new hope arising in a future filled with God's plans for a reign of peace because there really is a place for all at the inn.

[Msgr. Arturo José Bañuelas, STD is currently the pastor of St. Mark's Parish in the diocese of El Paso, Texas. A Latino theologian and founder and chair of the HOPE Border Institute, he is widely recognized and honored for his advocacy and work on issues of migration and justice from the perspective of the border.]

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