Spirituality
Soul Seeing



Central American migrants are seen inside an enclosure in El Paso, Texas, March 27, 2019. Over the last year, Catholic dioceses on the U.S. side of the border with Mexico, in places such as El Paso and Brownsville, Texas, scrambled to accommodate the growing number of children, men and women crossing the border. (CNS/Reuters/Jose Luis Gonzalez)



by Pauline Hovey

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"*Tend to what repulses you.*"

This is what I "hear" in my morning meditation. I had been reflecting on Jesus washing his disciples' feet — a scene so vivid in my imagination — foul-smelling, calloused, bare feet waiting for their turn to be bathed. Closing my eyes, I intended to practice lectio divina, with whatever word or phrase came to me from the reading. Instead, I was given this phrase, seemingly out of nowhere. "*Tend to what repulses you.*"

I don't have to ask for an explanation. The revolting scent of what Jesus encounters captures my senses like never before. Because of what I have experienced in El Paso.

And, yes, it repulses me.

Not unlike the memory of a little boy's dusty feet. A boy no more than 4 years old, his badly worn shoes were covered in a film of dirt from the desert.

Several months earlier, before the so-called "Migrant Protection Protocol" was forcing refugees to wait in dangerous countries, I had assisted Andree, along with his Guatemalan father, in our *roperia*, or clothing room. They had arrived at our temporary hospitality shelter, Casa del Refugiado, earlier that day, dropped off by ICE after being processed and vetted, ready to move on to their family sponsor where they would await their asylum hearing.

As is customary, we provide a change of clothes for all our guests before they take their shower. The El Paso community donates mostly all of the clothing — the rest coming from elsewhere in the country — and usually we have a sufficient supply. But our shoe supply is always minimal. Guests are only allowed to take replacement shoes if their own are falling apart, which this boy's clearly were.

So, when Andree smiled up at me, pointing to the display of children's shoes lined up on the shelf and asked for zapatos, I could not deny him. His father sheepishly grinned, already holding in his arms lavish gifts: clean T-shirts and jeans, new underwear and socks — a pair of each for both of them. He felt it was a lot to ask. I knew this without him saying so.

Meekness. Gratefulness. This has been my experience of the Central Americans who have come through our door.

But I told him it was OK and he lifted his son onto a stool, where little Andree's feet were now inches from my face. The color and original shape of his shoes barely recognizable.

Although I did not need to, I chose to help Andree change his shoes. I'd become enamored with this little dark-haired charmer traveling without his mamma, and I wanted to provide a feminine touch that I suspected he might be missing.

Andree giggled as I took his small feet in my palm, teasing him with childish sounds and tickling touches. We both laughed until I removed his filthy shoes. Instinctively, I turned my body away from him.

The stench overpowered me like nothing I'd ever experienced from a child. Including the dirtiest of diapers. I could not have imagined someone's feet being so foul-smelling, much less those of one so small.

To entertain Andree while my senses worked through the shock, I exaggerated disgusting noises and we were soon back to giggling together. I tried not to breathe in too deeply as I slipped another pair of shoes onto his feet.

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Later that day, another ICE bus arrived with a new group of migrants, and I joined volunteers to take down the new arrivals' information and connect them with their relatives, their sponsor, who would receive them here in the United States. As I took my place behind the table, I looked out at a sea of people waiting in folding chairs five rows deep. They appeared weary, disheveled, dirty.

A 21-year-old mother sat down before me hoisting a toddler with a runny nose onto her lap. As she answered my questions, I noticed she didn't seem to mind that the phlegm was about to reach her child's lip. I scouted out a tissue from my bag and hurriedly handed it to her. But it was too late. She'd already swiped her shirt sleeve across the little one's nostrils.

I grimaced and moved on to the next question.

Was she and her child traveling alone? Was anyone in their family detained or separated from them during their journey? I assumed the answer was no. Dozens of single mothers with children filled the chairs. Rarely did a couple attempt to get through immigration together nowadays since they'd become aware of the strong possibility of being separated.

But I had to ask. Her answer came through eyes welled with tears.

No longer able to maintain her stoic expression, Stefany cried as she began to relay her story. How the border patrol agents took her husband at the border. How she worried about ever seeing him again. She wondered if she could visit him in detention before heading to his parents, in Virginia, without him.

Another uncomfortable moment. Another instance where I wanted to turn my body away in revulsion. Not let myself feel the anguish in Stefany's eyes. Not feel the pain we are causing so many of these migrants. Simply fill out the paperwork and move on. It would have been so much easier. Instead, I placed my hand over hers. Told her I was sorry this happened. She cried harder.

"*… as I have done, so you must do.*"

Yes, Lord, I know you want me to tend to what repulses me. This one day — so clear in my memory — affirms your words.

I know you are asking more of me. More than the symbolic washing of my own son's feet during the Holy Thursday ritual. As special and beautiful as that is, it doesn't challenge me. It doesn't take me out of my circle of safety, down to the floor where the foreign stench from days on distant roads traveled fills my nostrils. Down to the place where another's pain repels me.

Sometimes, to be in service to love goes well beyond being inconvenienced. Sometimes it smells like feet that have been stuffed into shoes worn for weeks on

end. Sometimes it is found in the mess and heartbreak of runny noses, bodily odors and disheveled people clasping babies and toddlers, stripped of everything else they'd brought with them. Including their dignity.

Although I may turn from the stench, I will not turn my heart away from tending to what you have placed in front of me. From what you have asked me to do. To follow your example.

No, I cannot turn away.

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