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Migration
Migrants from Central America in Penitas, Texas, are seen next to a car as they are processed

Migrants from Central America in Penitas, Texas, are seen next to a car as they are processed by a U.S. Border Patrol agent after crossing the Rio Grande July 8. (CNS photo/Go Nakamura, Reuters)



by Catholic News Service

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A Catholic Charities official in southern Texas who oversees outreach to hundreds of migrant families entering the United States daily has asked a federal court to allow the agency to continue its mission of serving vulnerable people.

Sr. Norma Pimentel, executive director of Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley in the Brownsville Diocese, said in a declaration to the court that the agency is responding to Catholic Church teaching of upholding the dignity of the human person in serving the migrants, largely mothers and children.

The declaration by Pimentel, a member of the Missionaries of Jesus, was included with an amicus, or friend of the court, brief filed by Becket, a religious liberty law firm, on behalf of the agency.

Pimentel oversees the Humanitarian Respite Center in McAllen, Texas, which provides basic essential services to migrants who have been processed and released

by U.S. Customs and Border Protection agents.

The Aug. 12 filing came a day before a judge in the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Texas was to hear arguments in a case filed by the U.S. Department of Justice against Texas Gov. Greg Abbott seeking to block enforcement of his executive order that prohibits the transportation of migrants by anyone other than local or federal authorities.

Judge Kathleen Cardone temporarily blocked Abbott's order Aug. 3. The move halted enforcement at least until the Aug. 13 court hearing.

Abbott issued the executive order July 28 after authorities reportedly discovered a migrant family, being aided by the local Catholic Charities agency, at a fast-food restaurant without masks even though they were supposed to be in quarantine at a hotel after testing positive for COVID-19.

Pimentel said July 29 that while it's true that one of the families that her agency was helping "decided to go out of the [hotel] room and go buy a hamburger," it was an isolated incident and did not mean that all migrants do so.

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The Becket brief said that Abbott's "ill-conceived" order would lead to widespread suffering among migrants. "Migrants released into this country by Border Patrol have real human needs that ought to be met precisely because they are human beings," it said.

"Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley seeks merely to 'give a cup of water in Jesus' name,' and to provide other services to migrants who arrive at Catholic Charities' Humanitarian Respite Center, often just after experiencing harrowing trauma," it continued.

"Indeed, it is Catholic Charities' God-given task to give — to give water, to give food, to give shelter from the sun, to give medical treatment, and, at a fundamental level, to give respect for migrants’ common human dignity," the brief said.

Abbott's order preventing transportation of migrants does the opposite of his intent to limit the spread of the coronavirus, the brief continued, because mothers and

children would be released in border communities "without the COVID testing and transportation to quarantine locations that Catholic Charities provides."

Pimentel said in her declaration that all migrants are tested when they are released at agreed-upon locations by federal agents. Only migrants who test negative for the coronavirus are admitted to the Catholic Charities shelter, she said, while those who test positive are quarantined in hotels or other sites identified by local government officials.

"I remain deeply concerned that the governor's order prohibiting ground transportation will worsen the COVID-19 crisis and have a negative impact on the safety and health of those we serve and those in our surrounding community," her statement said.

Further, Pimentel's statement explained, "As a Catholic ministry, this work of charity flows directly from our Gospel-inspired mission to restore human dignity to those denied it."

She cited Pope Francis, who in his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* has emphasized that "migrants 'possess the same intrinsic dignity as any person,' and the same 'inalienable dignity of each human person, regardless of origin, race or religion.'"

In addition, Pimentel said, the Catechism of the Catholic Church "proclaims that our duty is to 'to welcome the foreigner' in search of security."

"Serving those in need, and especially those we serve through the Humanitarian Respite Center, is part of our sincere religious exercise as Catholics," she concluded.