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Spirituality
Bishop Mark J. Seitz of El Paso, Texas, shares a smile with a Honduran girl named Cesia as he

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



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For all the years Bishop Mark J. Seitz of El Paso, Texas, has spent ministering at the Mexican border with people on the move to the United States, it was a young girl, he said, who taught him about hope.

The girl, Cesia, was in Mexico at the border with her parents and siblings seeking asylum a few years ago, Bishop Seitz recalled during the online opening session of the annual Catholic Social Ministry Gathering Jan. 29. They had made a dangerous

2,000-mile journey — facing multiple attempted kidnappings — to seek a better life.

The girl's aunts and uncles had been assassinated in their homeland, he said, and the family likely would have faced the same fate had they not traveled north.

Describing how he was "jammed ... in a dusty no man's land" between concrete barriers, razor wire and armed border guards under a burning sun, Bishop Seitz said he found himself holding the 9-year-old girl's hand, his anxiety growing as he looked at the border crossing just feet away.

"I felt fear and vertigo. I felt the overwhelming weight of national indifference and abstract government policy," he said. "I felt for a moment what it must be like to be on the outside looking in. I was supposed to be accompanying Cesia. This should have been a traumatic experience for her, trauma on top of trauma, but it felt like she was accompanying me."

The border, however, was closed to asylum-seekers at the time, he said. "There was no room at the inn."

Undeterred, Cesia led the way, the bishop recalled, crossing the bridge "to the border guards, and, God knows how, ultimately to safety and security for her family."

"Talk about a hope that isn't optimism or wishful thinking," Bishop Seitz said. "It is the poor who convert us."

It is such hope, rooted in prayer and belief in the resurrected Jesus and the desire for encounter of others on society's margins, he said, that guides the work of the many people in the U.S. Catholic Church working to achieve social justice — like the 800-plus attendees of the four-day social ministry event.

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The gathering convened online for the second consecutive year because of the coronavirus pandemic, addressing the theme "Justice at the Margins."

Bishop Seitz said the invitation to prayer calls for a desire "to be in communion with the living God, the Lord of history."

"And I mean real prayer. Unguarded, vulnerable prayer. The prayer of the little girl crossing the Rio Grande," he said.

In addition, he continued, there is a need "to be in real relation with the poor, away from your inboxes, your desks and your cellphones."

"It's imperative that we are starting over again and again from the ground up. We who are not poor can hardly begin to approach the depths of hope without knowing what it means for those who live on the underside of history," the bishop explained.

Pointing to Pope Francis' invitation to the church in his apostolic exhortation "Evangelii Gaudium" ("The Joy of the Gospel") to become an evangelizing community, Bishop Seitz said that encountering others leads to bridging distances by embracing human life, "touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others."

Bishop Seitz credited attendees for continuing to "show up" and "step into the breach" to serve Jesus and poor people by bringing the church's witness into the public square with "joy and confidence."

Still, he lamented, much work remains especially because the pandemic has unmasked and even worsened racial and social inequality.

He challenged the notion expressed by some observers that the world was changed by the worst health crisis in more than a century. "But I'm afraid those sentiments are overly optimistic because too much continues to look just like it did before, and, in some cases, it is worse," he said.

He described the situation of essential workers, who have "borne the burden of our resilience, health and recovery and yet still our country will not remunerate their sacrifice with adequate labor and social protections, including legalized immigration status and a path to citizenship."

Bishop Seitz also expressed concern that widespread disregard for wearing masks and social distancing has played a role in the spread of variants of the virus that causes COVID-19. "But (the variants) are scandalously preventable, a product of global vaccine hoarding and the inability to see that we are all connected and that our futures are tied together," he said.

"So whatever was unmasked by the pandemic seems to have been made invisible again by willful ignorance," he said.

He raised questions about the response of the Catholic community and institutions that also have borne the pandemic's shocks.

"Are we more compassionate, more merciful, more sensitive to the needs of our neighbors?" Bishop Seitz asked.

"Having seen how fragile our social, economic and political life really is, are we more engaged, more committed and more convicted of the need to work for solidarity?" he continued. "Is our church more ready to take risks and stumble in service to the bruised person on the side of the road? We, too, should undertake an examination of conscience."