Opinion
NCR Voices



U.S. President Joe Biden shakes hands with Texas Gov. Greg Abbott upon Biden's arrival to the U.S.-Mexico border to assess border enforcement operations Jan. 8 in El Paso. (OSV News/Reuters/Kevin Lamarque)



by Michael Sean Winters

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President Joe Biden made his first visit to the U.S.-Mexican border on Sunday, Jan. 8, stopping in El Paso en route to a summit in Mexico City. Among those greeting the president at the airport was Bishop Mark Seitz, whom Biden invited to ride with him in "the Beast," the armored limousine that carries the president.

Seitz said he shared a prayer card to the Sacred Heart with the president, on which a young girl at a refugee center in Juarez, across the border, had written: "*Señor, te pido que me saques de aquí pronto, ayudame con mi caso quiero estar con mi mami y mi hermana pronto. Amen.*" ("Lord, I ask that you get me out of here fast, help me with my case, I want to be with my mommy and my sister soon. Amen.") I hope the president listened to the bishop.

The Lord is close to the brokenhearted, but we need President Biden to come to that young girl's aid also. The problems are insuperable, especially with a Republican-controlled House of Representatives, and the state with the longest border, Texas, in the hands of Gov. Greg Abbott who has repeatedly reduced migrants to political props, most recently sending busloads of them to Vice President Kamala Harris' house on Christmas Eve. They arrived completely unprepared for the cold that met them, with no instructions about where to go for help. The stunt was cruel and dehumanizing. That Abbott, who is Catholic, did not see the grim and self-accusing irony of doing this on Christmas Eve speaks to a gross failure at catechesis and moral education.



Yalimar Chirinos, a 19-year-old migrant from Venezuela, displays a sign near the U.S.-Mexico border Jan. 7 in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. The sign reads "Hello friends, we are from Venezuela, support us with what comes out from your heart." (OSV News/Reuters/Jose Luis Gonzalez)

In the days leading up to the El Paso visit, President Biden released new policies, some of which will help, but the most egregious of which, keeping in place and even extending the reach of Title 42, makes no moral or political sense. The U.S. Supreme Court had ordered the administration to keep the pandemic-related policy, which was twisted by the Trump administration into a bludgeon against migrants and refugees, in place in late December. They did not order Biden to expand its reach. And the irony can't be escaped that the Biden administration was arguing before the court to be allowed to end the program entirely, as Biden promised to do on the campaign trail.

Irony won't help the migrants. "It simply defies reason and lived realities to require those facing persecution, trafficking, and torture to only pursue protection from

within those potentially life-threatening situations," Bishop Seitz said in Jan. 6 statement when the policies were announced. "This is a drastic departure from the Administration's promise to create a 'fair, orderly, and humane' immigration system and will only exacerbate challenges on both sides of our border. Even for those who are permitted to enter the United States, we continue to be concerned about their access to housing, work authorization, legal services, and other pressing needs."

"Expanding Title 42 takes US policy in precisely the wrong direction, blocking access to asylum for even more people in need of protection," said Joan Rosenhauer, executive director of Jesuit Relief Services/USA, in a Jan. 5 statement. "As the Administration itself has argued, Title 42 is a COVID-era policy ungrounded in science and instead has been used as a tool to bypass our legal systems and undermine the right of individuals and families to request asylum."



Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso, Texas, celebrates Mass at St. Pius X Church Sept. 23, 2019, in El Paso. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)

One paragraph in The Washington Post's report on the new policies captured the challenge of bringing moral insight to bear on the political reality: "As many as 30,000 migrants a month will be expelled to Mexico under Title 42 if they cross into the United States illegally or enter Mexico or Panama without authorization, although humanitarian exceptions will be made, officials said." In this context, with tens of thousands of desperate, poor people at the border, how would anyone identify a "humanitarian exception"? Don't they all qualify?

We need to stipulate that the issue is complicated, that Biden inherited a mess, not just in terms of policy but because the Trump administration hollowed out the processes for receiving refugees and migrants, and that there was no way comprehensive immigration reform was going to pass the Senate. All true.

Still, Biden can start to do something he has so far failed to do, which is take a page out of history.

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In his masterful history of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's first 100 days in office, *The Defining Moment: FDR's Hundred Days and the Triumph of Hope*, Jonathan Alter details how FDR, who had a knack for understanding public opinion, approached the issue of what would be his signature domestic policies, unemployment insurance and Social Security. When he asked Frances Perkins to serve as secretary of labor, she agreed, provided he would support these key policies that would constitute the New Deal. Alter relates:

> As governor of New York, FDR, under prodding from Frances Perkins, first publicly advocated social insurance in 1930. But when he came to the presidency, FDR felt the country was not yet ready for such a big change.

> During the Hundred Days he declared that first Perkins should begin an education campaign, inside the administration and out, and assemble experts to design a new system. Perkins took him at his word and brought the subject up at every other Cabinet meeting, about twenty-five times in 1933. That year, she made one hundred speeches across the country stressing social insurance as a way to assist the unemployed and soften future depressions.

The president needs to shape public opinion, not merely respond to it. He can look to the churches for assistance in shaping public opinion on this issue. He can tap into ethnic organizations like the Polish American clubs and Hibernian Societies. He can invoke American history: Everyone in America is from somewhere else, even the Native Americans who crossed the land bridge from Russia! There are Republicans, like the Bush family, who support immigration reform and whose help can be enlisted.

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Even if comprehensive immigration reform passed tomorrow, its provisions would not address the crisis at the border today. We need to address the root causes of migration. The appointment last November of former Sen. Chris Dodd as special presidential adviser for the Americas, was a strong step in the right direction. Dodd, who has been very close to the president for almost 50 years, can help overcome the hurdles within the administration, where Susan Rice, the director of the Domestic Policy Council, has consistently taken hardline positions on immigration issues. Dodd would do well to meet with people like Seitz, and Catholic leaders throughout the hemisphere, to discern ways to ameliorate the crisis.

The Catholic Church needs to be on guard as well. The right-wing think tank the Heritage Foundation announced it had conducted a study of cellphone data to track the movement of migrants from shelters run by nongovernmental organizations like Catholic Charities. It accuses them of "exacerbating the crisis by actively helping

process and transport tens of thousands of illegal aliens into the interior of the United States." Put differently, the NGOs stand accused of acting on Matthew 25 — "I was a stranger, and you took me in" — and Exodus 23:9 — "You shall not oppress a stranger, since you yourselves know the feelings of a stranger, for you also were strangers in the land of Egypt."

Let us plead guilty to the charge.

Related: Border bishop takes lead role in Catholic migrant ministry