Opinion
Editorial



Migrants trying to enter the U.S. from Mexico approach the site where workers are assembling large buoys to be used as a border barrier along the banks of the Rio Grande near Eagle Pass, Texas, July 11. (AP/Eric Gay)

by NCR Editorial Staff

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Ten years ago, Pope Francis traveled to the small island of Lampedusa, halfway between the coast of North Africa and that of Sicily. He had been moved by the news of migrants drowning at sea when their small boat capsized while trying to reach Italy and a better life. The pope said he hoped to reawaken the conscience of the world to the sufferings of migrants.

As Msgr. Robert Vitillo, executive director of the International Catholic Migration Commission, said in a statement marking the anniversary, "many of us truly believed that Pope Francis had shaken the consciences of the entire human family. Regrettably, our naïve hopes did not stand the test of time."

Nowhere is the failure to reawaken the conscience of the world more evident than along the Rio Grande River.

Indeed, the "indifference" Pope Francis denounced at Lampedusa might be preferable to the attention the border is getting now from Texas Gov. Greg Abbott. The chief executive of the nation's second-largest state has overseen aggressive and harsh tactics, in which police and Texas National Guard have been ordered to the border, told not to provide water to dehydrated migrants — even during record-breaking heatwaves — and not to contact trained border control agents before confronting migrants.* The GOP governor also has deployed a 1,000-foot floating barrier of buoys that threatens to drown migrants at one river crossing, and concertina wire along the banks of the river elsewhere. The Department of Public Safety officers were reportedly told to push people back into the river, despite the risk of drowning.

The Texas bishops issued a statement about these "horrific tragedies" that

> stir our hearts again for the plight of our sisters and brothers who are seeking a better life. These mothers, fathers, children and others are doing what anyone would do to find a better life. They have moved to secure honest work and a safe community. The fact that they were born in a place which could not provide these basic human rights does not give anyone the right to treat them inhumanely.

These "horrific tragedies," however, are not like a natural disaster. They are more like "Hamlet" in which a character flaw develops and brings ruin upon everyone.

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Nativism is one of our nation's most persistent character flaws. It was latent in the late colonial period when the First Continental Congress warned of Catholics in Quebec conspiring to rob the Protestant colonies of their rights. It emerged again in the antebellum era when waves of Irish and German Catholic immigrants caused some in the white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant establishment to form a political party dedicated to restricting immigration, the Know Nothing Party. Periodic anti-immigrant outbursts characterized the late 19th and early 20th centuries, culminating in the Immigration Act of 1924, which barred migration from Asia and severely limited it from Eastern Europe.

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Throughout history, Catholics have been the principal target of nativism, and they still are. But now, Catholics are also among those doing the targeting, too. Abbott is himself a Catholic, as are some conservative Republican senators. How can a Catholic, whose church in this country has always been the target of nativist violence, become a nativist?

In April, we criticized President Joe Biden for his failure to enact more humane immigration policies. The fact that the Republican Party is even worse on immigration detracts nothing from our disappointment with Biden. Yet it is foolish to expect any politician to get too far ahead of public opinion.

That's where the religious leaders come in. Just as a group of religious leaders from across the denominational spectrum came together to form the Circle of Protection in 2010 to lobby for anti-poverty programs, it is time for religious leaders to form a similar effort to shape public opinion, summon the better angels of our nature and give impetus to long-overdue passage of comprehensive immigration reform. Catholics should be in the vanguard.

*This sentence has been updated to more accurately reflect Abbott's role in the border tactics.

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