Opinion

Guest Voices



A family of migrants is dropped off by a transport contractor for U.S. Customs and Border Protection at a shelter run by Annunciation House in downtown El Paso, Texas, Dec. 13, 2022. (OSV News/Reuters/Ivan Pierre Aguirre)



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My introduction to Annunciation House and its executive director, Ruben Garcia, happened in 2013 on a one-week border awareness trip that turned into a transformational faith journey. One that eventually ended in the unplanned uprooting of my life in Virginia and relocating to the southern border in 2016.

That's why the lawsuit by Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton accusing Catholic-based Annunciation House of being involved in human smuggling and trafficking is beyond outrageous. To me, it's personal.

In 2013, I was still relatively new to widowhood. With a son away at college and a quiet home in the rural Shenandoah Valley, I wondered what purpose my life could have now. During that week in El Paso, Texas, packed with presentations by immigration lawyers, U.S. Border Patrol officials, local educators and historians, it was Ruben's impassioned, inspiring words that undeniably spoke to my heart.

He shared how in the 1970s he and his young Catholic friends were meeting in this rundown building owned by the El Paso Diocese, studying the Bible and searching for greater meaning and purpose in their lives. They soon realized that God identifies first and foremost with the poor and the marginalized.

They turned their lives over to serving the most marginalized population — the immigrant and refugee. Eventually, the diocese gave them the building, and, in February 1978, Annunciation House officially opened.

I listened to his stories of death squads, torture and human rights abuses, and of the incredible faith and generosity of the destitute who passed through this house.



Ruben Garcia, founder and director of Annunciation House in El Paso, Texas, speaks with the media during a news conference Feb. 23. Garcia is reacting to the lawsuit filed by Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton that claims the Annunciation House "appears to be engaged in the business of human smuggling" and is threatening to terminate the nonprofit's right to operate in Texas. (AP/Andres Leighton)

Then, with tears in my eyes, I heard Ruben say, "Don't let your life go by without hearing what God is asking of you. If you're able to discover and act on that, there can be nothing greater. And you will know, because it will fill you with a sense of purpose and of the Holy Spirit."

Back home, I felt an unmistakable, illogical pull to return to volunteer. I had no knowledge of Spanish, no idea what I'd be doing, and I was supporting my son in college and a dog at home. But I trusted that inner call.

Everything fell into place and I returned for a few months in early 2014. It was the beginning of my love for this ministry and the people of El Paso.

In the summer of 2014, the nature of migration changed from mostly single Mexican men seeking work, to Central American families arriving in the Rio Grande Valley seeking asylum. Unprepared to deal with this new demographic, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) began flying planeloads to El Paso for processing. Unlike other communities, El Pasoans wanted to welcome them.

Ruben was at the helm of creating a network of temporary shelters to accompany these families. Every single shelter that opened was inundated with donations of supplies and volunteers. Thus began a communitywide effort that continues today under the umbrella of Annunciation House.

Unable to ignore what was happening at the border, I returned to El Paso later that year and volunteered at the shelter known as Loretto Nazareth.

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By then, Ruben and ICE had established a relationship of cooperation. Once the asylum seekers had been vetted and given documents to travel to their sponsor, ICE delivered them by bus directly to our shelter.

We gave them hot meals, showers, a change of clothes, and contacted their relatives or sponsors to request they purchase airplane or bus tickets within 24-48 hours. Time and again, I witnessed El Pasoans showing up with needed supplies, preparing meals, volunteering to drive and wash laundry.

I marveled at the horrific journeys and the deep faith of the people ICE brought to us. We all treated them with kindness, and often they told us we'd given them back their dignity.

We operated with the natural ebb and flow of migration until violence, poverty, drought, extortion and other flee factors increased exponentially, causing a wave of global migration that peaked in 2018 and still shows no sign of receding.

In the summer of 2018, when the Trump administration's family separation policy ended after a nationwide outcry, Annunciation House was one of four nonprofits selected to receive the families that were being reunited.

Ruben designated Loretto Nazareth as the reunification site, and suddenly national news media descended upon us. The publicity brought volunteers from all over the country to Annunciation House, as many Americans wanted to do something positive to help.

By then, I'd long ago sold my Virginia home and moved to El Paso. The Holy Spirit had powerfully renewed my sense of purpose.

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Over these 10 years, I've witnessed Border Patrol and ICE agents not only admire the structure of our operation, but even bring us donations. Despite the growing and seemingly overwhelming demands, I've witnessed Ruben's calm and grounded presence as he responds to the needs at hand, always putting first the dignity of the human being in front of him. He continues to send daily texts to shelter coordinators and volunteers informing them of the number of people ICE is releasing and how many will be sent to each shelter.

It's ironic that Paxton called Annunciation House a "stash house" when it ministers precisely to those victims of kidnapping, smuggling, rape and torture that ICE processes after they've escaped their abductors. Paxton clearly doesn't know the meaning of the term. Or worse, he simply chooses to spread venomous lies to promote his agenda.

Ruben and the El Paso community have shown me what it means to live the Gospel, what's possible when you trust in the abundance and love of God rather than in the message of scarcity and fear. Ruben is as selfless and saintly a person as I've ever met. I doubt he's ever taken a day off from serving others.

Living the Gospel has never been easy. But now it's being demonized and condemned. Our freedom to practice the corporal works of mercy, to care for the poor and marginalized who show up at our gate, is being threatened in a way we've never seen before.

Those who serve immigrants and refugees are being intimidated and threatened. Anyone endeavoring to follow Christ should and must take this lawsuit as a wake-up call.

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