News



Auxiliary Bishop Lizardo Estrada Herrera of Cuzco, Peru, stops by the altar of St. Rose of Lima at St. Patrick's Cathedral, July 8 in New York City. Estrada, general secretary of the Latin American bishops' council, said you can't kneel with reverence before the Eucharist while also rejecting the poor, including migrants, working toward measures that lead to their death or lack of dignity. (NCR photo/Rhina Guidos)



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The secretary general of the Latin American bishops' council said it's incompatible for Catholics to show deference to the Eucharist while — in word or deed — denying migrants life and the dignity they have as children of God.

Auxiliary Bishop Lizardo Estrada Herrera of Cuzco, Peru, spoke with National Catholic Reporter July 8-9 as he prepared to meet with United Nations officials in New York about the dire situation facing much of Latin America: rising violence, government corruption, decreasing support for democracy, destruction of habitats due to climate change and spiraling economies — all leading to massive migration from Latin America and the Caribbean to other parts of the world.

The U.N.'s High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that this year 25 million will be displaced and stateless in Latin America and the Caribbean, even as the region also receives migrants from other parts of the world, such as Africa, Estrada said. Two documents the bishop shared with U.N. officials July 10 show the "sad reality in our Latin America regarding immigration" in 16 countries in the region as well as the Caribbean, Estrada told NCR.

"These studies show specifically this moment of sadness, an increasing sadness, as we watch these suffering Christs, our brothers and sisters, leaving their homelands, not because they want to but because they don't have basic conditions [to live adequately] or because they're being persecuted," Estrada said. "And when they leave, they leave family behind, their culture, everything. And sometimes on that journey they also leave life itself behind, dying on that journey."



Auxiliary Bishop Lizardo Estrada Herrera of Cuzco, Peru, general for the Latin American bishops' council, waits in between meetings at the United Nations July 9 in New York City. (NCR photo/Rhina Guidos)

The Catholic Church, through its parishes, shelters, diners, humanitarian organizations, religious communities and volunteers, carries out heroic work with migrants "in the jungle, the mountains, the most difficult places" to reach, but the church "cannot meet a demand that grows and grows," he said.

Particularly worrisome, said Estrada, is the increasing hostility, including by some Catholics, against migrants and those who help them. Some don't see that it's incoherent to participate in a public act of piety, such as taking Communion or being deferential toward the Eucharist, while at the same time harming a person in need with words or actions that deny them a chance at life, he said.

"Dear Catholic brother and sister, the Christ you encounter in the Eucharist is the same Christ you encounter in the poor!" he said in a message to those who take part

in the Sacrament. "You can't kneel in front of the Eucharist, where God exists, and not also see that same God in the migrant, the one who suffers, the poor, the sick, the person in prison."

The conference of Latin American bishops, known as CELAM for its Spanish acronym, worries particularly about those fomenting rejection and hate against migrants for political purposes, he said, resulting in verbal and physical violence, or denying migrants water, food or shelter, something that's become commonplace, he said.

In the U.S., Louisiana's governor recently cut $1 million in funds for a homeless shelter Catholic Charities runs, publicly saying it was because of the charitable organization's work with migrants. His counterpart in Texas also has been trying to shut down Annunciation House, a shelter, over its work with migrants.



Auxiliary Bishop Lizardo Estrada Herrera of Cuzco, Peru, who is general for the Latin American bishops' council looks over his notes at the United Nations, July 9 in New York City. Estrada spoke with officials at the UN about the dire socioeconomic situations in Latin America and the Caribbean that are driving mass migration. (NCR photo/Rhina Guidos)

"Unfortunately, as in the time of Jesus Christ, when Christ was given vinegar instead of water, today, we are giving vinegar to our brothers and sisters instead of giving them water," Estrada said. "And that hurts us. It hurts us deeply and we want to do as much as we can … to be a prophetic voice."

Estrada made some of those concerns known in a meeting with Paula Narváez Ojeda , vice-president of the U.N.'s Economic and Social Council, to whom he gave "New Migratory Contexts Since the Pandemic" and "Crossroads in the Human, Social and Environmental Development of Latin American and Caribbean Societies," the documents prepared by CELAM's Socio-Anthropological Pastoral Observatory, said Guillermo Sandoval, its director.

The documents detail, with statistics and analysis, a worrisome landscape for Latin America and the Caribbean, where xenophobia is on the rise, climate change has destroyed towns and cities as well as crops and Indigenous communities, where unemployment is widespread and economic recovery has been slow following the COVID-19 pandemic. It's also a place with a high dissatisfaction of political systems and structures and just 28% of Latin America and the Caribbean said in 2023 to be "satisfied with democracy." Corruption is rising among the political class, says one of the documents, and narcotrafficking is pervasive.

"Without structural changes, the social system in Latin America is not sustainable," said one of the reports.

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The bishop's meeting at the U.N. "is a novelty," said Sandoval, who was traveling with Estrada, adding that he knew of no prior meeting by a high-level CELAM official to the international organization where the world's nations gather to sort out problems peacefully. The goal, Sandoval said, is to "show the reality of Latin America and the Caribbean from the church's point of view" and start a conversation.

Estrada's meeting took place on the day the United States signed an agreement with Panama to block and deport migrants arriving through the Darien Gap, a stretch of jungle that connects Central and South America, a popular route for those heading for the U.S.

Estrada appealed to U.S. Catholic politicians, other Catholics and non-Catholics who speak against migrants, who harm them by trying to destroy their shelters and reject them, to think about their family's past, saying that they, too, migrated. Humanity, as the Gospel shows, has been a tale of migration, he said. And the coronavirus pandemic showed humanity, as Pope Francis said, that "we are all in the same boat," he added.

In his visits and meetings with migrants in various parts of the world, Estrada said he has seen "places of welcome" as well as places where migrants find themselves lost, without shelter, food, or a friendly word or face, sometimes dying or suffering alone, robbed of their documents, identity and dignity.

"For us, it's urgent that governments, the United Nations, the entire world know the situation and think about the situation, about laws concerning migration and how to find solutions," he said. "Jesus came so we would have life, abundant life, but if there's no work, there's no food, there's no respect for human rights, it is not life."

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