News



Two unidentified Jesuit priests concelebrate Mass in the Chihuahuan Desert in New Mexico Dec. 21, 2025, for a 20-year-old Guatemalan woman whose remains were previously recovered in the area marked by the cross, and also for two women whose remains were found Dec 19. (OSV News/Courtesy of Collin Price)

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A dozen Jesuit priests and seminarians plus some lay volunteers found the remains of two women Dec. 19 after they scoured an 80-mile stretch in the corner of the largest desert in North America in a search for migrants, whether living or deceased, who crossed the U.S.-Mexico border.

About 20 people concentrated the search on the southeastern edge of New Mexico bordering El Paso, Texas, in the Chihuahuan Desert over a weekend.

This year, searchers were especially aware of the tough climate for those wanting to migrate to the U.S. during nearly a year of the Trump administration's hardline immigration policies, including a major crackdown on border crossers.

Heidi Cerneka, a member of the Maryknoll Lay Missioners community, went out with the Jesuits. She has volunteered in searches every month in the Chihuahuan Desert for the past two years and almost every time, each site had human remains.

Cerneka told OSV News that finding only the two sets of remains in a single site after more teams than usual looked through 10 sites for three days "was unusual." Last year, searchers came across eight areas containing the remains of missing individuals.

But she said that even if the searches led by the Ajo, Arizona-based Battalion Search and Rescue, which took the team to the area, have become more refined, "I would never want the desert to be easier."

"These are not normal times" under President Donald Trump, Cerneka said.



Heidi Cerneka speaks during a Posada in El Paso, Texas, Dec. 21, 2025. (OSV News/Courtesy of James Holeman)

She deplored the Trump administration's recent severe limitations on asylum as an option for those without papers.

On Dec. 19, the Department of Homeland Security reported that more than 2.5 million people unauthorized to be in the U.S. left the country either by self-deporting (1.9 million) or being removed by the government (660,000). DHS credited the Trump administration's restrictive measures with fewer border crossings and apprehensions at the start of the federal government's fiscal year in October. There were 29% fewer than the previous October.

But even with fewer recorded crossings, the search and recovery group does not expect its work to end, according to Battalion founder James Holeman.

Cerneka is an El Paso-based immigration attorney. She said the work of finding human remains is something that gives her better insight into some of her clients' lives.

"It's really a sense of understanding what they went through to get here," she said. "It's knowing that even though 99.9% of the time, we're not going to be able to definitively identify someone, the fact that we're out there means something. The fact that we're out there because people matter and their family deserves to know. And the government needs to be responsible for recognizing the people who are dying out there."

Teams record coordinates of the remains and leave markers for local authorities to be able to pick them up and do the forensic work of identifying them.

But Holeman told OSV News the local sheriff's office and medical examiner in Doña Ana County, New Mexico, has been uncooperative, making working with them "very difficult."

It wasn't until local media started to report about this that the remains started being picked up, he said. Five sites, he added, have been left untouched for the past 15 months.

Rooting through arid terrain made up of hillocks and spindly shrubs with no distinguishing landmarks in sight, under a piercingly bright sun, has made the migrants' plight even more real for the volunteers.

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Cerneka pointed out while volunteers have radios to call for help, plenty of water and "good shoes," migrants have little water, likely traveled far to get into Mexico and probably do not know whom they are crossing with into disorienting territory.

"How much more vulnerable they are because they're scared," she said.

Vincent Truong, a Jesuit seminarian, searched for the first time and said he did not know what to expect. He was on the team that found the two sets of remains they believed were women.

"It's something sobering to be able to see," he said. "Not just, you know, a leg or an arm bone, but, to see the mandible, the jawbone. See the spine, and to just ... sit with that."

Truong, 31, told OSV News that, in that moment, the feeling of not knowing "what I was looking for" in the desolate silence was completely erased.

"My prayer became a kind of calling out to those in the desert saying, 'If you want to be found, let me find you. Then cry out so I can hear you.' And so that became my prayer as I was walking for those three days," he said, describing an overpowering sense of love that drove him to look for more lost migrants.

Truong said his companions found cast-aside Bibles and rosaries, and he was struck by what he imagined was "the psychological and spiritual difficulty [of the migrants]. What spiritual hope did they hold on to as they were crossing? What did that look like? What did that feel like? What did that sound like?"

The first-year master of divinity student at Boston College said that in the middle of the desert he also wondered about his own immigrant parents' experience of coming to the U.S. He called them "boat people" from Vietnam and said he pictured himself in the middle of the sea escaping a war-torn country, as he was walking in the middle of the desert among its indistinguishable, disorienting surroundings.



Jesuit seminarians Jaret Ornelas, second from left in back, and Vincent Truong, center in blue, pose with brother Jesuits outside Sacred Heart Church in El Paso, Texas, Dec. 18, 2025. (OSV News/Courtesy of James Holeman)

"It's a weird feeling to kind of be able to have almost both an experience that isn't mine, but also is mine at the same time," Truong said.

Jaret Ornelas, a Jesuit seminarian also studying at Boston College, took his brothers on this search for the second year in a row.

"The terrain is very challenging here," said Ornelas, 36. "We were doing longer miles. ... It's harder to do grid work. Keeping an eye on each other is a little bit more challenging. And it's also, I imagine, very challenging for people traveling because there aren't the big landmarks like there are along the routes with the mountains and stuff in Arizona. It's very, very easy to get turned around out there."

He has gone out with the Battalion Search and Rescue group for the past four years but had only previously volunteered in Arizona searches. There, Ornelas described to

OSV News, it was easier to stay together and keep a grid formation while scrutinizing the ground.

But even if this New Mexico search with its confusing endless egg-carton style hillocks yielded a small number of remains, he said he "really felt God's presence here."

Ornelas said it was also because of the "vibrant" local church community in El Paso, where the Jesuits stayed. They also hosted El Paso Bishop Mark Seitz, immediate past chairman of the U.S. bishops' migration committee, during Saturday night dinner Dec. 20.

Ornelas said doing the search, experiencing community, and having a memorial Mass for past recovered and identified migrants with the local church gave him the sense that "this is right."

"No matter what the outcome is — whether we find 10 people or we find nobody — the mission is the same: to recognize the dignity of every person, including those who are deceased, knowing that God holds them and holds their families," he said.

This story appears in the **Immigration and the Church** feature series. View the full series.