News



Fr. Brian Strassburger smiles as Alcala Bouilly sings into the microphone during Mass at Casa del Migrante on Thursday, March 19, 2026, in Reynosa, Mexico. (AP/Michael Gonzalez)

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Over the past five years at the U.S.-Mexico border, Jesuit Fr. Brian Strassburger has gone from ministering to throngs of asylum-seekers in overcrowded shelters to celebrating Mass with detained and deported migrants.

But while border crossings have drastically shrunk under President Donald Trump's administration, the Jesuit priest said his mission remains centered on embodying the Christian message "that God is accompanying you on your journey.

"And the journey, whether it's northbound or southbound, involves a lot of suffering," Strassburger added. "We have a faith that speaks to us amid that suffering. We have a God who says, 'I want to be one of you.'"

Based in the Rio Grande Valley in Texas, Strassburger heads the Del Camino Jesuit Border Ministries, a trio of Jesuits who have been providing Mass and other sacraments to migrants on both sides of the U.S.-Mexican border since 2021.

Border crossings plummet under Trump

Back then, thousands of migrants crammed into bare-bones shelters daily before and after crossing the border in record numbers.

Nearly 2.5 million people crossed the border illegally or came legally through a system for those seeking humanitarian protections from May 2023, when Joe Biden's administration ended COVID-19 restrictions on asylum, until January 2025, when Trump declared a national emergency at the border at the start of his second term.

Strassburger celebrated Mass in packed shelters in McAllen, Texas, and just across the Rio Grande in Reynosa, Mexico, where many thousands slept in tents in makeshift shelters and hundreds more waited outside for a chance to cross into the United States even as the Biden administration started to impose restrictions.

He was there, at a shelter run by Catholic nuns, the day after the Trump administration canceled all border appointments would-be asylum-seekers had made through an app to enter the United States.

After celebrating Mass, he asked people how they were managing the news. Most said they were feeling devastated, terrified and deceived. But one woman raised her hand and said, in Spanish, "The last thing we lose is hope."

"Sandra, she doesn't place her hope in a smartphone app or in a presidential administration or in a government. She puts her hope in the Lord, and that is a hope that doesn't disappoint, even in the midst of the despairing moments of life," Strassburger recalled. "If Sandra can say that, in that day and in that moment, how can I lose hope in my own ministry here on the border?"

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One priest's journey to ministry on the border

The 41-year-old pastor's journey to the priesthood and border ministry was one of grace more than planning, Strassburger said.

Raised in Colorado by Catholic parents, he dreamed of becoming a dad, math teacher and basketball coach in a Jesuit high school like the one he attended. It was after college, while volunteering with the Augustinians — among whom he met the future Pope Leo XIV — that he first considered a religious vocation, especially when ministering to AIDS victims at a hospice in South Africa.

"I'd always thought a religious vocation or a priesthood was like this cross that you bear because God tells you you have to. He's like, 'Sorry, Brian, you're one of those ones who has to be a priest.' And you're like, 'OK, God,'" Strassburger said. "I started to think, what if the life of priesthood isn't this great burden, but actually the way for me to be my best self?"

In 2011, he entered the Jesuit novitiate and five years later, despite knowing no Spanish, he was sent to Nicaragua for more than two years. On his return, newly bilingual, he spent a summer at the Kino Border Initiative in the two Nogales — the cities in Arizona and Mexico just across the fence.

That's where he found his mission, the ideal place for his ability to navigate a bilingual context and serve as a bridge. After ordination, his superior asked him to establish a Jesuit presence in the Rio Grande Valley, literally at the country's margins, the places where Pope Francis had urged the church to go.

"I couldn't have said yes fast enough," Strassburger said, adding that the local bishop then assigned him and another Jesuit a simple mission. "He said, 'Read the

reality and respond to it.' And that's what we've been trying to do since then. And we identified very quickly the need for pastoral accompaniment of the migrant population."

A new mission at the border for those detained and deported

With the ongoing immigration crackdown, Strassburger has been focusing on celebrating regular Masses at two large Texas detention centers as well as in shelters in Mexico.

One of them, in Matamoros, is run by Mexican authorities for people who've been deported — some of them after decades in the United States, like one woman with six children, all U.S. citizens, ages 19 to 6. She was arrested after 29 years in the country, right before Christmas at an immigration court check-in.

"She's like, 'I just keep thinking, was it a mistake for me to even try to regularize my status? Like, if I had not gone to court that day, would I be celebrating Christmas with my six kids?'" Strassburger recalled. "That's the kind of thing we encounter every day."

Five years ago, William Cuellar was deported back to his native Mexico, which he left when he was 4. He's now also staying in a shelter in Matamoros, which abuts Brownsville, Texas, to facilitate visits from his mother and adult children who remain in the U.S.

He started attending Mass with Strassburger six months ago and sees him as a friend more than a priest.

"When I met Fr. Brian, I was like, 'Cool, I can communicate in English with someone else,'" Cuellar said. "He provides me with the time to hear me out."

In addition to sacraments such as Mass, confession and baptisms, it's that consoling, listening presence from Strassburger and the other Jesuits that helps migrants the most, added Sr. Carmen Ramírez, who runs the Casa del Migrante shelter in Reynosa with another Catholic nun.

"They bring hope to people," Ramírez said. "These men, they bring the Gospel, a glance of empathy, of compassion."

The shelter now hosts about two dozen people mostly from Honduras and Mexico. When the Jesuits visit twice a week, another 50 families come for Mass and activities focused on mothers and children, most of whom are from Haiti.

"Fr. Brian is a man who knows how to relate to children. I imagine Jesus when I see them running to hug him," Ramírez said. "His apostolate is of listening, of sitting down to listen, looking at people straight in the face, saying that there is a God who loves them through this encounter."

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